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And every little while a crash of stones ahead proclaimed that Hans, too, was having his narrow escapes. [Page 148]

Motorcycle Chums in New England.

MOTORCYCLE CHUMS IN NEW ENGLAND

OR

*The Mt. Holyoke
Adventure*

By
ANDREW CAREY LINCOLN



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CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. AT THE SIGN OF THE CROSSROADS.	7
II. THE RESCUE OF FRECKLES	17
III. STRANGE NEWS	28
IV. THE RUNAWAY MOTORCYCLE	41
V. POOR BUDGE	52
VI. LOST, STRAYED OR STOLEN	63
VII. THE MYSTERY THICKENS	72
VIII. WHEN THE WARDENS CAME	80
IX. THINGS KEEP GOING	91
X. THE COMING OF GID	100
XI. THE FAITHFUL SENTRY	108
XII. ADDING INSULT TO INJURY	116
XIII. A CLUE IN THE AIR	125
XIV. FROM ABOVE AND BELOW	133
XV. THE PATH ALONG THE FACE OF THE CLIFF.	142
XVI. CONVICT AND TIGER	150
XVII. WHAT HAPPENED TO HANS	158
XVIII. SOWING THE SEEDS OF KINDNESS	166
XIX. VIA WIRELESS	176
XX. THE FLIGHT OF THE COMET	187
XXI. PITY THE POOR TIGER	198
XXII. WHAT THE CREVICE HELD	210
XXIII. GOOD NEWS	221

Motorcycle Chums in New England

OR

The Mount Holyoke Adventure

By ANDREW CAREY LINCOLN

CHAPTER I

AT THE SIGN OF THE CROSSROADS

"Slow up, Jack, won't you? We've taken the wrong path!"

"But that was the crossroads we just passed, all right, fellows!"

"Sure it was; but I reckon you ought to have turned to the left!"

"Shucks! what makes you say that, Freckles? According to my way of thinking, Jack did the right thing!" exclaimed the third number of the trio of boys occupying the wheezy old white auto that had just come to a grumbling halt on the country road.

The shadows of night had closed in, making their surroundings appear vague and indistinct. And while the machine boasted of two headlights, the lamps sent what small amount of light they could boast straight ahead.

This might be all very well so far as showing up obstacles that awaited them on the road itself went; but it availed little with regard to illuminating their surroundings.

"Hold on now," the pilot of the ramshackle car remarked; "I don't dare say which is right, Budge or Freckles; because, for a fact, I couldn't read what the old sign-post said as we buzzed past. This may be the road to Bradentown; or it might take us to Mt. Holyoke, if we kept on long enough."

"Well, this sure beats the Dutch!" grumbled the fat boy, called Budge, with an air of supreme disgust; "how in the dickens are we going to find out then; tell me that, will you?"

The long-legged Freckles uttered a short, scornful laugh.

"Say, that's an easy one," he remarked. "Suppose you climb out, Budge, and paddle back to the sign-post as well as your bandy legs will let you. Here, I'm generous enough to lend you a match; and if you're half as spry as you claim, why, you ought to be able to climb up so as to read what it says, and report. We'll promise to wait up for you here, won't we, Jack?"

This was said in the coolest, most condescending manner possible. If the purpose of Freckles was to stir up a little hornets' nest about his ears he certainly accomplished that end immediately.

"Oh! I will, eh?" snorted the fat boy alongside him in the tonneau of the ancient car; "ain't you kind about it, now? I admire your nerve, Freckles; it's like that big granite monument that stands over old Peter Gazzam's grave in Staunton cemetery. Seeing that we're two against one, seems to me it's up to you right now to go back, and prove your case. Besides, Freckles, you know you're built for a climber much better than me."

That last assertion had probably been put in for a clincher. And it certainly bore truth on its face, for while Freckles was tall and angular, Budge was undeniably fat; so that he wheezed with the least exertion.

"I second that motion," remarked Jack Kinkaid, acting as umpire in the dispute. "It's only fair that you get a hustle on you, Freckles. I'll promise not to let the old White Elephant run away, while you're finding out facts."

Freckles apparently realized that he had, as he remarked himself, "put his foot in it"; and that there was now nothing left for him to do but drop out of the car to "toddle back to the crossroads."

Still he did not seem any too anxious to leave the society of his chums. Standing up, he glanced all around at the gloomy woods, and stretches of pasture that faded into the mystery of the dark night.

"Hey! Jack, perhaps you were right after all," he remarked.

"Listen to him trying to hedge, would you!" cried Budge, indignantly. "Before I'd take water that easy! You made an assertion; now prove it one way or the other, Freckles."

"That's right," laughed Jack. "After what you said, I'd hate to go on any further. If we hit it wrong you'd have the laugh on us; and we'd waste a lot of time. Besides, Alec would miss connections. Get a move on you, Freckles. You said you had matches, didn't you; because it's so dark you'll need one to read the sign. Skip right along now, please; and don't be any slower than you can help."

"Oh! well, I suppose I'll just have to," grumbled the tall lad, as he proceeded to climb out of the car; "but make sure you don't rattle off, and leave me here in this lonely place all night. Gee! I just happened to think about what we read of that railroad train that was wrecked the other day. Don't you remember that it had the circus aboard; and they said some of the animals escaped?"

Budge gave a scornful shout.

"Listen to him squeal, will you, Jack?" he exclaimed; "p'r'aps he thinks that tiger we saw in the menagerie is loose, and waiting to eat him up. Hey! let me tell you something, Freckles.

I know for a fact that the poor beast with all his stripes ain't able to bite worth a cent. Why, I don't believe he's got three teeth in his mouth. He never could gnaw your tough old hide. They just had to poke him with a pole every time, to make him roar; he was that lazy and old. Take heart, Freckles. If you should meet up with Stripes, just give him a 'booh; and he'll turn tail all right."

Of course, after that the other could no longer hold back. To be an object of ridicule or pity at the hands of Budge was something he never could stand.

"Rats! who's afraid?" he remarked, straightening up instantly. "Gimme just five minutes, fellows, and I'll be with you in a jiffy."

With that he ran off along the back road; for the car had passed the division of the highway by about fifty yards at the time Jack succeeded in bringing it to a standstill.

"Jack," said the stout boy after they were left alone, "what d'ye think, was he really scared; or putting up a good bluff just for fun? I never can tell what he means, he plays so many tricks on me all the time."

"Well," answered the one to whom this question was directed, as he got out of the car, and bent over to fix one of the lamps that seemed wabbly; "as a matter of fact, I've got a suspicion

that it was something else besides the tiger that was bothering our chum."

"Whatever can you mean, Jack?" demanded Budge, puzzled to account for these words.

"Perhaps you've forgotten that little time we had a year ago at the old mill, when Freckles woke us all up in the middle of the night, and declared that a cold hand had touched his face? He was shivering to beat the band, and had us all rattled in the bargain."

At that Budge chuckled aloud, as he quickly exclaimed:

"Sure I remember; and how on looking around we found it was only a stray calf that had wandered in, and was lickin' Freckles' face, mistaking him for its ma. Oh! yes, now I get on to what you mean—you believe he's a little daffy on the ghost subject. Is that it, Jack?"

"Well, I've heard him speaking about those sort of things; and I happen to know he's always reading up every scrap he can find about spirits. That's why he looked around at the dark. Freckles can be as bold as a lion in the daytime; but he sometimes shows a yellow streak after night."

While the two lads were sitting there, waiting for their chum to return with his report, it might be well to say a few more words concerning their intentions, in thus traveling the lonely road that,

after passing two pretty lakes above, wound on to distant Mt. Holyoke.

The old car was pretty well laden with camping goods. There was a tent that was supposed to be waterproof; several cooking utensils that Budge and Freckles owned between them, quite an assortment of provisions, such as a bunch of boys possessed of healthy appetites might expect to make way with during a week's stay in camp; some warm blankets, a gun, and perhaps a few other things which one or the other considered indispensable.

Indeed, Budge was so fond of his comfort that he could have loaded two such cars with stuff, if given permission. He fought so hard to retain his pet banjo that in the end the others allowed him to smuggle it aboard, though they knew they would be tortured by the so-called "music" which the fat boy actually believed was prime.

Budge was the son of a retired business man, built on generous proportions himself, and whose ample girth was always being held up to the young hopeful by Freckles, as a horrible example of overfeeding. He had yellow hair and blue eyes; and while provokingly slow, was at the same time usually so good-natured that no one could quarrel in earnest with jolly, easy-going Budge.

Freckles had a doctor for a father. When the

physician, Dr. Codling, who had a large practice, indulged in the luxury of a new and up-to-date car, he allowed Ambrose the privilege of using the discarded machine; which had been dubbed the "White Elephant" by Freckles and his chums. It made a terrific noise when in action, and was forever getting out of order.

Jack Kinkaid was the mechanic of the party. He came by his genius naturally, for his father had always been of an inventive frame of mind. Jack was a serious sort of chap. There was good reason why this should be so, for he had seen much of trouble in his young life.

His father, who was something of an inventor, had perfected a wonderful little engine, that, because of its extreme lightness and power, seemed destined to quite revolutionize the new profession of aeronautics; since it could be carried in an aeroplane, and give more satisfaction than the old type of motor, with one-fifth of the weight.

But something terrible happened just when he had the invention completed. In his employ was a man name Hans Barker who had quarreled with Mr. Kinkaid. In a spirit of revenge this rascal had stolen a valuable paper that was really the key to the wonderful invention. Its loss had partly unhinged Mr. Kinkaid's mind; so that, try as he would, he could not duplicate

the important part of his engine. The more he racked his brain the worse became his condition.

This had happened almost six months back; and at present he was in a bad way. The family were able to get along fairly well, since he had some little property; but Jack's heart was very sore every time he contemplated the wreck of his dear father's mind. If only that paper could be found again, he believed his father would have his full faculties restored.

Hans had vanished, nor had they ever heard of him again. The paper he carried off could not be used to advantage by either himself or any other, without the balance of the design; but its absence effectually prevented Mr. Kin-kaid from completing his wonderful engine.

Often did Jack dream of recovering that same paper, and filling the heart of his mother with a great joy, as he placed it before his distracted father's eyes. But since Hans had utterly vanished, and could not be found, Jack was unable to even hazard a guess as to how this consummation of his wild hopes could ever be realized.

There was a fourth member of the club, a boy by the name of Alec Travers, who, being detained at home at the time of the start, had agreed to follow after his chums on his motorcycle. A little later on we shall have the pleasure of making his personal acquaintance, when it will be fitting to say more about his history.

Jack was still fussing over the lamp that did not seem to be giving as much satisfaction as it should, and Budge, curled up on the seat of the tonneau, was even indulging in one of his usual yawns, as he chuckled over the pleasure of having some one else do the running, while he took it easy; when without the slightest warning there broke forth on the night air a rousing whoop, such as might only spring from a pair of good lungs; and then followed the clearly spoken words in the well known voice of their comrade, Freckles:

“Hey! keep away from me, you! Help! Jack! Budge! Come quick!”

CHAPTER II

THE RESCUE OF FRECKLES

"Oh, listen to that, would you, Jack? Something terrible is after Freckles! Get the gun, and fly to his rescue, won't you, please?" cried Budge, sitting up as though he had suddenly come in contact with the business end of a galvanic battery.

"Grab up the gun yourself, and come along with me! I'll carry this lamp, so as to see what's doing!" said Jack; and suiting the action to the word by unfastening the auto light with which he had been working at the time.

Poor Budge was in a dilemma. He did not want to chase after Jack, when neither of them knew what it might be that was getting Freckles worked up to such a pitch of alarm. And on the other hand, he dared not stay there alone.

Accordingly, as in a dream, he just obeyed the stern order which Jack had given; and fortunately enough his trembling hands fell on the shotgun the first thing. Little Budge cared whether there were any shells in the barrels or not; it was all the same to him.

Out of the car he scrambled, gripping the weapon tightly. Jack, meanwhile, had succeeded in wresting the lamp from its socket, and was starting to run along the road, throwing its light ahead of him so as to see any object that might threaten dire results.

Freckles was still shouting, and breathing all sorts of earnest entreaties for his chums to hasten, before he were utterly lost. Naturally this sort of thing got on the nerves of Budge, as he came panting along in the rear; so that he managed to let out a few mild spluttering cries himself.

"Wait up, Jack! Oh! why are you always in such an awful hurry? You know Rome—wow! I nearly broke my neck that time over a stone! Please hold on! I've got the gun, you know! What if it happens to be that man-eater! You're a better shot than me. Wait up, can't you?"

But Jack was apparently deaf to his appeals. Already he had covered one-half of the distance between the stalled car and the point where the road split. As he turned the light straight ahead he could begin to make out things fairly well. And what he saw was a sight he would not soon forget.

Freckles was there, and in plain evidence. So far as Jack could see he had not as yet been

even partly devoured by any escaped tiger from the East Indian jungles. Yes, he was perched on the top of the tall sign-post, and only seemed anxious to get as far away from the ground as possible.

But if Jack half expected to discover a striped beast crouched at the foot of the post, or jumping up in the effort to nip the toes of Freckles, he certainly had another guess coming; for not a single thing could he see save the boy on the sign.

"What's all the row about, Freckles?" he cried, as he came up, with Budge booming along in the rear.

"There it is, Jack!" cried the boy aloft, pointing off into the darkness to where a field lay one side of the road. "Oh! it tried to grab me in its skeleton arms, sure it did. But I saw it just in time! Come closer, while I climb down, that's a good fellow, Jack! I just knew something was going to happen; I felt it in my bones!"

Astonished at these words Jack immediately turned, and sent the light from the lamp in the direction Freckles had indicated. Then he let out a whoop in which Budge joined.

Standing there, and staring at them with a look of mild wonder in her eyes, was a cow! By accident she had a white face, and apparently it was this moving object that Freckles had seen in the gloom.

When Jack looked up again he saw a sheepish grin creeping over the humorous countenance of his angular comrade. And for the life of him he could not positively say whether the other had been really and truly frightened; or was playing one of his customary pranks, with the intention of giving Budge a new thrill.

But the fat boy could only see it in one way. No matter how his own flesh had been creeping with suspense and alarm, as he galloped along, approaching the spot where the trouble lay, he believed he had the laugh on Freckles.

"Now, what d'ye think!" he exclaimed; "he took an old cow for a ghost, and sent out a yawp for help! Oh! my, but ain't that rich, though? And he's the fellow who's always talking to me about courage, and all that! After this we mustn't let him go out alone after dark. The curfew bell must ring for poor little Freckles; because we couldn't afford to have a silly cow carrying him off. Say, it was a calf last time and now look! Oh! my, oh! me! but I'll never, never get over this."

Freckles came quickly down from his exalted perch. He was still grinning in that exasperating way of his, as though at any rate he found some reason for amusement, even when the laugh were on him.

"Well, anyhow, I coaxed IT to run a little, and

that exercise is going to do a whole lot of good. But I say, Jack, you were right after all," he remarked coolly.

"You mean about the sign?" demanded the one he addressed.

"That's it. We're going all right, and this is the road to Lake Constance. Just another mile or so, and we'll come to the place where we told Alec we'd make our first camp, and wait for him."

"All right; then perhaps we might as well turn back to the car; that is, unless you want to have a little more talk with your friend in the field here," and Jack once more flashed his light over the nearby fence to where the cow stood, apparently not knowing whether to resume her grazing, or trot away.

"Oh! we understand each other without any more words," chuckled Freckles. "So let's be moving, fellows. And Budge, please quit shaking that way. The danger's all over. Besides, there ain't any shell in that gun, so it can't go off."

Budge just glared at him, being too full of indignation for expression. It was generally that way; and seldom did he find a chance to turn the tables on his tormentor. For Budge was rather inclined to be thick-witted, as well as lazy and slow; while his chum possessed a

peculiar faculty for crawling out of difficulties with a show of success.

"There's the car any way!" Budge managed to say, presently, as the light showed the white object in the road.

"Sure it is!" ejaculated Freckles cheerfully. "I wonder now, if the poor fellow expected that it had taken a notion to run away by itself. P'r'aps he's thinking of that same tiger I was mentioning. Cheer up, Budge; he may be educated enough to show off in the circus, but I don't reckon he knows just how to operate a motor. Don't be too hard on him, Jack; he'll get over his nervousness in time, let's hope."

They clambered aboard again, and Jack started the engine.

"Thank goodness! she's not balked again!" said Freckles; for they never could tell when the antique motor would take a notion to quit, and leave them in some manner of hole, as had happened frequently in the past.

"Only another mile, and then let her sulk if she wants to," laughed the pilot, as he peered ahead at the road, which was none too well kept for comfort.

"It's better than walking, if I do say it," remarked Budge, who had the happy faculty of quickly getting over his little fits of indignation, brought about by the nagging of his chum; just

as the sun bursts out from behind a small cloud, to shine all the brighter by contrast.

And so, with the engine of the doctor's discarded machine keeping up a constant rattling and squeaking, they continued to advance along the lower road.

"Now, look sharp, fellows," said Jack, presently. "I reckon we've gone a mile from the crossroads, and we ought to show up that leaning tree soon. Budge, you keep watch on the right; and Freckles, you comb the left side. Sing out when you get a glimpse of anything that looks like what Alec described."

Hardly had he spoken when Budge gave utterance to a quick squeal.

"Hi! hold up, Jack!" he cried in excitement.

Freckles made a half movement in the direction of the gun, which he had taken the trouble to load as they entered the car.

The pilot at once shut off power, and applied the brake.

"You're right, Budge; I saw it too," he remarked; "and we've stopped just where we wanted. Now to get things going, so as to have supper ready when Alec comes up. Everybody overboard, and then I'll look to see where I can run the car among the bushes, out of the road."

A tree that had been partly uprooted in some

former gale, hung over the road, and made a landmark that could hardly be mistaken.

Jack soon found a way to get the car to one side. Then all of them set to work in the endeavor to make camp. They had been out before and knew considerable in connection with such things. Besides, this chum Alec, who was soon to join them, had once spent a year on a ranch out West, and was able to give his comrades many valuable pointers with regard to outdoor life.

A fire was kindled first of all. Budge took it upon himself to attend to this part of the program, while his comrades busied themselves erecting the tent in which they expected to pass the night.

In a short time things began to take on a mighty comfortable appearance; at least that was what Freckles remarked, as he looked about him; and then began to open sundry packages taken from the car, which contained food of various kinds.

Budge made the coffee, and prided himself on his knowing just how to brew the "finest kind of ambrosia ever," as he was accustomed to saying. He knew very little about cooking, and was generally made to run errands, bring wood and water, clean fish, and all such things, by Freckles, who could perform with credit on

the frying pan, and concoct a lot of mysterious messes, that however had the credit of tasting wonderfully fine, which is all any boy demands.

"Hope Alec don't disappoint us now," remarked the chief cook, as he bent over the red ashes, and poked at some potatoes he had baking. "Things are near ready, and it's a shame to keep a camp supper waiting, you know, fellows."

"Oh! don't worry about that," spoke up Budge cheerfully. "You can set Alec's aside for him, but my share is going to fill up this horrible vacuum as soon as I can get it in my grip. All told, boys, I guess we're a lucky lot to have such a clever chef along with us."

Freckles beamed with pleasure, for that was one of his weak spots; and a little flattery in connection with his cooking always made him contented.

"Oh! that's nothing new with you, Budge," he remarked; "luck always tags after you, no matter what happens to the rest of us. After that time in school when we all got licked for your trick, and you slicked out of it, whenever I hear the word luck mentioned, I just think of Budge Clifford. They go together."

Both Jack and the fat boy laughed with him at the recollection. It was in connection with some prank that Budge had played, and which

broke one of the rules of the school. The teacher realized that the other boys in the class knew who was guilty, and declared he would whip them one by one unless they told. But like loyal school fellows, they declined to betray a comrade; and so one by one they stood up and took their medicine.

Finally only Budge was left. He looked so innocent that the teacher disliked to inflict pain on him; and so, weary from the wholesale use of the rattan, he had said in a compassionate tone of voice:

“Now, Budge, if you will tell me who did this, I promise not to whip him again, and I’ll let you off!”

Thereupon the guileless and smiling Budge had promptly cried out:

“Thank you, sir. All right! I did it, sir!” and the school was immediately turned into an uproar with the yells of the whole class.

And that was why Freckles, who had been one of the sufferers, was pleased to say Budge was the luckiest fellow on earth.

“Listen!” exclaimed Jack just then, raising his hand.

“It’s him, as sure as anything!” cried Budge.

“And he’s just used his muffler cut out to let us know he’s coming!” said Freckles.

The rapid popping of a motorcycle under

fair headway could be heard, and rapidly approaching the new-made camp. Presently the rider came in sight; and bringing his machine to a halt, strode into the circle of firelight. And every one of the three boys who were in camp saw that Alec Travers brought news of more or less importance when they noted the look of excitement on his determined face.

CHAPTER III

STRANGE NEWS

"Just going to sit down, and have supper, Alec," said Jack, who knew the other would speak when he got ready; and never even dreaming that the news could have any connection with his fortunes.

"And it smells mighty good, too," remarked the newcomer, sending Freckles an approving nod that made that worthy grin again.

Budge realized from this that he had better hold his tongue, and not go to asking what it was Alec had on his mind. And so presently they were squatting around in various attitudes, long-legged Freckles doubled up like a Turk, with his "fishing poles," as Budge called his lower extremities, under him; Jack and Alec sharing a log; and Budge with his back against a tree, the picture of contentment.

The potatoes were well done, and with seasoning, together with a little butter, proved very appetizing; the Boston baked beans, with the addition of some catsup Budge had made out to fetch along, suited them to a dot; the coffee

was simply grand; and other things, such as bread and butter, cheese, some cold chicken, and pickles, went to make up a grand total that tried even Budge's well-known capacity.

Finally they could not be induced or tempted to take another bite. And it was then that Jack, turning to his chum, remarked:

"Now, we'd like to hear the news, Alec, if you don't mind; because we knew the minute you struck camp that you had something to tell. Freckles here has been more or less bothered thinking about that old tiger that got loose the other day. He imagines he sees the striped thing behind every bush. Say, Alec, was it about the aged man-eater you're bringing news?"

The newcomer turned and surveyed Jack queerly. He was a fine, manly looking boy, with a resolute face, brown curly hair, and eyes of the same color. An orphan, Alec lived with a guardian, named Mr. Worthington, who being a jovial old chap, allowed his ward every privilege he asked for. And how the other three did envy him the possession of that Reading motorcycle which he called the "Comet." They had all determined to possess similar machines in the near future, and even now were saving every dollar they could muster, meaning in the case of Budge and Freckles at least, to ask

the balance from their respective fathers when they had reached a certain sum.

"Why, no, Jack," the newcomer started by saying; "the news I'm bringing with me does happen to be connected with the escape of a prisoner bearing a striped coat; but it's no tiger."

"Oh! I know what he means!" exclaimed Freckles, whose quick wit often outran the duller mind of Budge. "He's going to tell us there's another break-away over at Dannemora penitentiary, and some of the zebra boys are loose!"

"No use trying to keep anything back when Freckles is around," laughed Alec.

"Then that's what it is, eh, Alec?" demanded Jack, feeling uneasy, he hardly knew why, save that his chum still kept looking at him queerly.

"Yes," Alec went on, seriously. "Two of them got away yesterday, and are said to be moving in this direction. The paper had quite an account of one fellow holding up our old friend Farmer Jasper, who you know lives near the lake above, and begging a meal from him."

"But what has that got to do with us, Alec?" asked Jack.

"Yes, do you expect that we're going to run across one of those poor chaps, during the time

we're camped on Harmony Lake? A little food would be all he'd want from us, I guess," remarked Freckles; while Budge moved uneasily, and a look of alarm began to steal across his rosy face.

"Wait. You'll understand better when I tell you the names of the two convicts that have broken loose," said Alec. "One was called Dan Brockett; and the other's name is Hans Barker!"

At that Jack gave utterance to a cry that seemed to spring from his very heart.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "I knew it would come some day; yes, even when things looked darkest something seemed to tell me to still hope on. For you see, Freckles and Budge, that was the name of the scoundrel who stole my father's secret—the key to his wonderful invention, the loss of which has almost caused him to lose his mind. Hans Barker—and so he was in prison all the while we hunted for him?"

"Yes, the whole story came out in the New York paper. I got it just before leaving home and you can read it later. It tells about what he did to be arrested, having burglarized a house down in New York City. Nothing was found on him in the shape of a paper; so you see, Jack, he either destroyed that drawing he stole from your father, or else hid it away."

"Oh! I am sure he would never have burned

it up, for Hans was too smart not to know its value to him. Perhaps he secreted it, with the intention of some day trying to make a fortune out of it. And Alec, didn't you say they had come this way—that one of them had been seen near the lake?"

"Yes, that's what the account said. And perhaps we'll see some of the wardens from the pen while we're up here," replied the other.

Jack's face lighted up with pleasure and eager anticipation.

"Who knows but what I might happen to run across Hans, then," he muttered. "He always liked me, too. Oh! if only I could get him to tell me where he had hidden my poor father's drawing! Wouldn't it be the finest thing that ever happened?"

Alec saw that his chum was deeply affected by the news. He gave him the newspaper in which he had seen the account. Then he started chatting with Freckles and Budge to keep their attention distracted from Jack while he pored over the paper.

"What's the matter here?" asked Alec. "Seems to me Budge has a haunting look of distress on his face I never remember seeing there before. What's happened to upset you, old fellow? Thinking of the missing tiger? There isn't one chance in a thousand we'll see anything of the

beast. Like as not he's thirty miles away from here; and perhaps the circus men may have trapped him by this time. I heard they were out in force to gather in the animals that got away."

Budge grinned in a sickly fashion.

"Say, do I just have to confess, fellows?" he asked, pleadingly.

"Course you do," Freckles immediately asserted, his curiosity being aroused. "I just bet now he's gone and smuggled a piano, or something like that, along with his banjo, and means to set us crazy with his warbling."

"You couldn't guess it in a week," declared Budge, with a grimace. "Listen to my tale of woe, fellows. You all know how I've been scraping and saving every dollar, so as to get a motorcycle like Alec's this fall? Well, I've gone and made a fool of myself, and stand to lose a nice little bunch of bones through sheer stupidity."

"I can well believe that!" muttered Freckles; whereat Budge scowled at him, and continued with his confession.

"Well," the worried one went on saying, "you know my den on the top floor of our house—I've got three gas burners there, and my dad told me last month that I was burning entirely too much gas, sitting up there with

you fellows at all hours of the night. So he laid down the law, and from now on every cent over the average he set, he's going to make me stand for."

"Shucks! is that all that's ailing you?" burst out Freckles. "Why, just stop and think, you'll be making money all the time you're up here at the lake."

"That's just the trouble," said Budge, forlornly. "I'm in danger of getting swamped, of losing the good coin hand over fist. Because, you see, I never had occasion to go up to my den after I locked the door last night; and for the life of me I can't remember whether I turned those three lights out or not. Sometimes I seem to think I did; and then the horrible idea hits me square in the face that I didn't do anything of the kind!"

"Oh! that's a rough deal, sure enough, Budge!" exclaimed Alec; while Freckles grinned amiably, as though he felt rather tickled over the occurrence.

"Just think of me laying awake every night after this trying to remember what I did," the other went on, with a deep sigh that seemed to well up from his shoes. "A fine vacation I'm going to have, ain't I now? I can just imagine I hear that awful meter down in the cellar, clicking away ever so fast, day and night,

and eating up my savings, cent by cent. And you know how we all made a solemn vow that not one of us should go back home till the week was up, on pain of the most dreadful penalties! I'm in a bad fix, and don't you forget it."

"Hold on," said Alec, consolingly. "You know Jack means to get in wireless touch with that lame boy living next door to him, Bud Perkaiser. Now, when they get things working all right, why, you can ask him to step around to your house, and see if the gas is really burning."

"Thank you, Alec; you relieve my mind somewhat; but it means several days' wait, anyhow," Budge remarked, giving signs of feeling a little more cheerful over the prospect.

"But I don't understand why somebody wouldn't see the blessed lights burning, by looking up at the windows, and put 'em out?" remarked Freckles.

"Oh!" Budge exclaimed, "I forgot to tell you that I've got those dark green shades over all the windows, and I always pull 'em down when I light up. Nobody would know whether the gas was burning, day or night."

"But even if the lame boy went around, how'd he find out?" persisted Freckles.

"Nothing to hinder him going up to see for himself," replied the other. "I hide the key

to my den under the carpet at the head of the stairs. Used to forget to fetch it along so much, I got tired of toddling down after it. We could tell him that; and he can always get in at the side door. Fellers come in any old time, and Susan, our girl, she don't pay any attention to 'em."

"Well, forget it for a while, Budge. Even if it is burning it won't break you to stand a little loss," Alec remarked.

"But I hope Jack will get his blooming wireless in working order as soon as he can, that's what," Budge said, hopefully.

"Oh! I forgot to tell you about the fellow I overtook on the way here," Alec remarked. "I don't suppose either of you could guess in a week of Sundays. It was Gid Staples!"

"The bully of Staunton, the fellow who's given us more trouble at times than any three in town. Now, what d'ye suppose he wants up in this direction?" asked Freckles, unconsciously putting up a hand to feel of his nose; for once upon a time he had been engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter with the said Gid, from which he had emerged with a badly bruised face, though honors were said to be even.

"Don't know," Alec continued. "He was mounted on that horrible old wheel of his, with the tires tied up with rags, and plastered

with tape until it looks like fun. Had a package of some kind tied on the handlebars too. Just scowled at me as I went flying past, and made some sort of face. But he was several miles out of town, and it was getting dark too."

"Hey! p'raps Gid's been chased out of town," suggested Budge, with a grin.

"It wouldn't surprise me a whit if he was," replied Alec. "He's been a bad egg for a long while now, and more'n a few times been warned that he'd be jugged if he didn't mend his ways."

Jack lifted his head just then, from reading the newspaper by the firelight.

"What was that you said about Gid Staples, Alec?" he asked.

"Only that I met him on his old wheel; or rather overtook him on the road, for he was heading up this way," replied the other.

"I wonder if that could have anything to do with the escape of Hans," Jack went on, eagerly; "for perhaps you may not know it, all of you, but Gid Staples is a full cousin to Hans Barker. And you said that he had a package tied to his handlebars too, didn't you, Alec?"

"Yes, that's so," replied his chum; "but I wouldn't bank too much on there being anything in that idea, Jack. He may be going over to Mt. Holyoke to take a job, working for some farmer there."

"Well, that's hard to believe for many reasons," Freckles declared positively. "First, Gid never works. Second, no farmer who knew him would give him a job. And last of all, if he was going all of that distance over a rough, hilly road, Gid would never, never start so late in the afternoon. How's that, fellows?"

"Sounds good to me, for a fact," remarked Alec.

"Hard common sense back of that statement, Freckles," Budge asserted, solemnly.

"And I believe that what I hinted at may turn out to be the truth," Jack declared. "In some way, perhaps, Hans has been able to get in touch with Gid. They used to be something of cronies a while back, I remember. And now Gid may be taking some clothes up to the escaped convict, to replace his striped suit that gives him away wherever he may go. Or it may be food he's carrying. But something seems to tell me his coming has to do with the fact of Hans getting away."

He went back to pondering over the strange affair, and his three comrades cleared away the remains of the supper. A little while later they were making up their beds for the night, each one securing a certain amount of hemlock browse to cover the ground under a blanket to the depth of several inches; and this promised a comfortable and fragrant couch.

Budge was out after another supply of the small twigs while the others rounded off their places under the tent. Just as Freckles was about to make one of his usual witty remarks, he stared at Budge crawling in under the flap; for the face of the other was as white as chalk.

"He's here, f-fellows!" stammered the fat boy, his eyes looking like small saucers, they seemed to stick out of his head so far. "I t-told you the b-blessed old tiger'd be after me! J-just saw him creepin' through the bushes out there, right where you s-stood your wheel up against a tree, Alec. B-bet you he wants to nab one of us, and run off with the m-motor-cycle!"

None of them thought to laugh just then at the absurdity of Budge's declaration. Even the idea of a trick circus tiger riding a wheel did not appear to strike the humorous Freckles as comical at that particular moment; though later on he might recall those words, and roar over them. Budge was the picture of fright, and his alarm communicated in a measure to the rest.

Jack picked up the shotgun, and started to dash out, with the others trailing after him in a stream. Freckles managed to lay hold of the hatchet they had brought along; Alec wielded a heavy billet of wood; while Budge,

hardly knowing what he was doing, clutched his precious banjo, as though unwilling to leave it to the tender mercies of the jungle beast.

In this fashion then the quartet issued forth from under the tent. Naturally enough their eyes were immediately turned in the direction of the tree against which Alec had left his motorcycle when he arrived. To their intense wonder the machine was no longer there; but something moving over on the road caught their attention. Poor Budge gaped as he saw what he believed was the striped jungle beast trundling the heavy motorcycle along, to suddenly leap into the saddle, and pedal vigorously away!

CHAPTER IV

THE RUNAWAY MOTORCYCLE

"Stay in camp till we come back, Budge and Freckles!" shouted Alec, as he started wildly down the road after Jack, who, gun in hand had begun to chase in the wake of the fleeing motorcycle thief.

"Oh! my goodness gracious! did you ever see the like of that?" cried Budge, turning with staring eyes toward his tall comrade.

Freckles did not entirely like the idea of being left out of the hunt; but he recognized the wisdom of some one remaining by the camp to guard their valued possessions; and Budge did not count for much in that line.

"It was pretty swift, for a fact," he admitted, looking after the runners, who of course had passed out of sight; though he could hear sounds from the darkness that seemed to take on the form of shouts and wild laughter.

"I never would have believed a poor old toothless tiger could a-rode a wheel, if I didn't see it with my own eyes!" Budge went on, seriously, with an utter disregard for grammar.

Freckles turned on him at that.

"Hey! what's eating you, Budge?" he cried. "Mean to tell me you really believe it was a genuine man-eating tiger that hooked Alec's wheel, and pedaled off like hot cakes?"

"Why, sure it was," replied the other, innocently, "didn't you see his stripes? When I glimpsed him in the bushes he growled at me like the dickens, and I thought I was a goner. They must a-taught him that trick in the sawdust ring, I reckon."

Upon which Freckles doubled up like a hinge that was closing, and fairly held his sides as he roared with laughter.

"Listen to that, would you?" he cried. "An educated tiger, giving free shows at bareback riding on the turnpike! Hey! Budge, where are your ears? Don't you hear somebody laughing at the top of their voice, and yelling like mad? Think that's either of our chums, do you? Well, you're away off, if so. That's your man-eater whooping it up! He's being run away with by the motorcycle going lickety-split downgrade, and he don't know enough about a machine to put on the brake. I'm afraid there's going to be something happen to Alec's bully old motorcycle. And as to the escaped convict, he may get his head cracked in the tumble he's going to take pretty soon."

"What! was it a man, then?" exclaimed the amazed Budge. "Oh! how silly of me to think that only a zebra and a tiger had stripes! Of course convicts are marked that way so they can't hide out. And that's why Jack refused to shoot at him with the gun. He thinks it may be Hans, and he doesn't want to hurt him, because Hans is the only one who knows where that valuable paper is hidden!

Freckles was still looking and listening, although the sounds had grown fainter, as if the party on the runaway motorcycle found his breath failing him; or else distance mellowed the noise.

All at once there was a wild whoop, accompanied by what seemed to be a crash.

"There!" ejaculated Freckles, clapping his hands; "that was when he did it, all right. I'm sorry for Hans, and likewise for poor Alec's wheel. If one is broken it means the other stands a good show to be in the same fix. Now we'll have to wait for the boys to come back, and just spend our time guessing what happened."

Meanwhile Jack and Alec had sped down the incline after the thief, who was making the heavy motorcycle fly along faster and faster, although he knew nothing about its mechanism, and depended on the grade, as well as his feet being on the pedals, to urge him on his way.

The two boys kept almost side by side as they ran. Both were good sprinters although likely enough the longer-legged Freckles could outrun either in a pinch, for a short distance at least.

The man who had stolen the wheel, for some purpose or other, seemed to know that the two lads were chasing after him. Perhaps he had seen them make the start. At any rate he soon began to send back defiant cries, partly through recklessness, and again on account of his excitement.

"He must be wabbling like the dickens, Jack!" gasped Alec, whose keen hearing detected certain signs that another might not catch.

"Yes, and any second I expect to hear a smash!" said Jack, between his set teeth.

"My poor motorcycle, good-by!" groaned the owner.

"And I hope Hans don't break his neck in the bargain!" grunted Jack, who of course could think of only that one important thing, to the effect that the convict carried with him the secret concerning the hiding place of that precious paper which he, Jack, would give so much to regain.

"He must be at the bottom of the incline by now!" Alec presently shot across.

"Then we'll get him on the rise, for he can't

push the machine up, and keep out of our hands," wheezed Jack.

"Oh! listen to that, will you?" cried Alec, hardly able to suppress a groan as there came the same whoop Freckles and Budge had heard, accompanied by a crash, and succeeded by silence.

"I guess he's done it all right, that time," grunted Jack, in dismay, as he thought of the bitter disappointment that would be his portion if the escaped convict had indeed broken his wretched neck.

"I've got some matches, if we can only find where he went smash," he added, as they still continued to hurry along toward the bottom of the descent.

"I can see you there, and go one better," remarked Alec; "for I happen to have my little electric torch in my pocket. Thought I might find some use for it on this camping trip. We must be near the spot now, Jack. Wonder which side he took his header from."

As he spoke Alec produced the small but serviceable torch of which he had just made mention. Once he had pressed the button a mellow flood of light shot forth, directed principally in one direction. Alec immediately turned it to the ground, for his western training was apt to stand him in good play right there.

"Here, you can see the marks of the two

wheels," he observed. "And just as you said, they wobble from one side of the road to the other. All we've got to do is to follow them a bit. What's that ahead, Jack? Looks to me like a bridge over a creek."

"Just what it is," replied the other. "Perhaps an outlet from one of the lakes above, running down to the river. What if he plunged into that? Did you hear anything that sounded like a splash, Alec?"

"Don't know. I thought it was a crash; but after all it might be the other. Look here, this is where he lunged across the road, and went through the bushes!"

The two boys, with their hearts beating much faster than was their wont, followed the track of the machine. They did not know what they were about to see, once they had entered among the scrub alongside the road.

"There's your wheel, Alec!" exclaimed Jack, suddenly, clutching his companion by the arm, and pointing beyond.

Alec raised the little torch so that its feeble rays showed them plainly the motorcycle not twenty feet away.

"Why it's stuck in some soft mud!" said Jack.

"As sure as you live; and let's hope it wasn't badly injured when it landed," the other lad remarked, as he pushed on.

They kept on the lookout, expecting to discover a human figure garbed in the striped garments of a convict somewhere close by; but strange to say nothing of the kind seemed to reward their diligent search.

"Here's where he landed in the mud," cried Jack, presently, and with positive relief in his voice; "then I guess Hans wasn't killed, or hurt very bad. He may live to give me the information I want, after all."

"Why, yes, he landed on all fours, like a big frog," observed Alec. "See, here's where his two hands stuck in the mud. You can see the print of every finger as plain as anything."

"Oh! that makes me remember something," said Jack. "Let me have your torch for just a minute, please, Alec."

He stooped down, and seemed to be closely examining the imprint of the convict's hands. When he once more arose Alec saw that a look of perplexity had come upon his chum's face.

"What ails you, Jack?" he asked, knowing that the other had met with a disappointment of some kind.

"Why, I was wrong, after all. This fellow isn't Hans, but must be that other prisoner who escaped the same time he did," Jack replied, shaking his head sadly.

"But how can you tell, when you haven't

seen him, only as he bolted with the machine? How do you know it isn't Hans?" demanded Alec.

"The imprint of his left hand tells me," replied his chum, pointing down at the mud where the fellow had sprawled on all fours, after being thrown from the wheel.

"You see, Hans had the misfortune to lose his forefinger from that hand. This man has all of his fingers just as much as I have. Look for yourself, Alec."

Taking the little torch Alec made haste to confirm this fact.

"Say, now, that's what I call a clever thought on your part, Jack. Couldn't have done better if you'd lived on the plains all your life. Yes, in that case then, we are dead sure now that the man who got away with your wheel wasn't Hans. Perhaps he's further up in the hills, and we may run across him later on."

He said this because he saw that Jack had really met with a keen disappointment, and he wished to buoy up his hopes; rather than that he had any great expectation of such a thing coming true.

Taking hold of the motorcycle they proceeded to haul it back to the road again. Here both boys examined it as well as they were able, with the little light at their disposal.

"Bully!" exclaimed Alec, with considerable enthusiasm, for him; "I honestly can't see where there's been any particular damage done by that plunge into the mud. It must be that some of Budge's luck is coming my way nowadays."

"I suppose there's no use in our hunting for the fellow," remarked Jack, as he looked back toward the place of the accident.

"Not that I know of," replied his chum; adding with a laugh: "we haven't lost any pair of striped pajamas that I know of. Let the poor chap alone. It will take him the rest of the night to scrape all that mud from his face and clothes. What a sight he will be! As for us, the sooner we hike back to camp the better Freckles and Budge will be pleased."

This seemed to be a wise proposition, and so they started without delay.

On arriving at the fire, which the others made sure was burning cheerily, the pair of returned adventurers were greeted with a volley of questions.

"Take it easy now, fellows," laughed Alec. "You'll hear everything, all in good time. You see, we recovered my motorcycle; and so far as I can find out there's been no damage done. Come and sit down. Jack will give you the particulars, while I start in to clean up the

wheel. I'd hate to leave it in this nasty state till morning."

Jack was well able to do the needful. Of course his little yarn was interrupted many times by the impatient Freckles, who seemed to get ahead of the story every little while. Budge on the contrary just sat and gulped the narrative in, his fat face the seat of both wonder and admiration.

When Jack came to the point where he learned that the motorcycle thief could not have been Hans, both boys broke out into a cheer.

"That was fine of you, Jack!" said Freckles. "I never would have thought of such a dodge. But what under the sun d'ye suppose the fellow wanted of your machine? He didn't know how to run it; guess he thought it was just some new kind of a bicycle, and would give him a chance to spin out of this section."

"That's the conclusion Alec and I reached after talking it over," Jack responded, calmly. "But he made a mistake. On the level he might have pedaled off with some show; but on the down grade the heavy machine just turned the tables."

"You mean it ran away with the thief?" asked Budge, grinning.

"Just what happened. But all's well that ends well," Jack went on. "Alec has his

motorcycle back again; and the fellow saved his neck. I don't think we'll be bothered again with him."

"All the same," spoke up Alec, "we've just got to keep watch and watch tonight. When tigers and escaped convicts are abroad we can't afford to all sleep at once."

CHAPTER V

POOR BUDGE

The night passed without any alarm.

It was really divided into three watches, for knowing the proneness of poor Budge to sleep, Alec dared not trust him on guard alone. Filled with the best of intentions the stout youth would be found calmly snoring before half an hour had passed. Wake him up and lecture him, and the chances were that he would drop off again, even while the talk was going on. To Alec's mind he was a hopeless case.

But that night brought no further disturbance. Morning came at length, and the four boys busied themselves in preparing breakfast, as well as getting the tent down, so as to make an early start.

When the time came to move on, Alec was the pioneer. Mounted on his Reading machine, he served as the pilot. Jack looked after the old White Elephant, and carefully nursed it along, up the grade beyond the scene of the previous night's mishap to the motor thief.

This name had been given with a double meaning to the doctor's turned down car.

Not only was it white in color; but it made such agonizing sounds when in action that it seemed as though every part of the machinery were offering up a protest against inhuman treatment.

Besides, Freckles had had so much trouble with the monster in times past, that he always declared it was a "white elephant on his hands," eating up his spending money at a terrific rate, in gasoline and repairs.

Of course the two boys who had remained in camp had to get out at the bridge, to see for themselves just where the thief had taken his mad whirl; and they even got down to examine the imprint of his hands.

A mile further on the car gave a last groan, and refused to climb another yard.

But they had been expecting this, and Jack without a word climbed out, raised the hood, and started to tinker with the works.

"Half an hour for a rest, fellows," he announced, with a laugh. "I think the old top is just leg weary, that's all. But we've got the whole day before us; and it ain't more'n a few miles to the second lake, you know."

"Thank goodness for that," grumbled Freckles. "Because if she tries this balking game every mile, we'll take till dark to fetch up there, all right."

"Wake me up when things are fixed, please," announced Budge, calmly, settling himself comfortably on the seat as if for a nap.

"No you don't," cried Freckles, seizing hold of his collar, and forcing him out of the car by main force. "You snoozed the whole blessed night, while the rest of us stood guard like men and heroes. You're taking life too easy, as it is. Physical exercise is what you need, my boy; and now you've just got to keep me company to the top of this hill."

"Oh! piffle! what's the use of being in such a hurry?" complained Budge, trying to hold back, but without success as the other just marched him off.

"Didn't you hear Jack say the poor old car was worn out from toting such a load?" demanded his tormentor. "You're the main guy who's causing the trouble. I'll walk a pound or more off you. Jack, look for us when you climb to the summit."

It was all of half an hour before Jack coaxed the machine to be good again, and take up its wheezing programme. He found his comrades awaiting him above, Alec having come back to ascertain what was causing the delay; though he could easily hazard a guess, knowing of old the tricks of the cranky White Elephant.

It was easy work coasting down the next

hill; and after that they had another climb. This brought them within sight of the first of the two little sheets of clear water, called Lake Constance.

Skirting the shore of this they continued to mount still higher, though the rise was not so steep now. Wonderful to say, the old motor car seemed to have taken a new lease of life, and failed to balk again. When Budge started to comment on this seeming miracle, Freckles immediately clapped both his hands over his mouth hissing:

“Keep still, you silly! Don’t mention it above a whisper. If the bally old thing hears you, ten to one she’ll just give a grunt, and throw up the sponge flat. Guess I ought to know her ways by this time. She’s booming along all right now, because she forgets she’s going. Tell her about it, and just for spite she’ll kick over the traces. So forget it after this. Talk of the scenery, that striped tiger, the escaped jail birds—anything but White Elephants.”

Presently they lost sight of the lake, and once more entered among a heavy growth of timber. The loneliness of the place increased as they advanced. High hills on every side seemed to shut them in.

“This is just the thing for us, fellows,” an-

nounced Alec, as he surveyed their wild surroundings.

Budge shivered a little, and had nothing to say. He seemed to look at each successive thicket as though he really anticipated that something would spring out, and give them another exciting experience.

These boys had formed a club, based upon Alec's ownership of a motorcycle, and the hopes which the other three entertained of also securing similar mounts by the time fall came along. They called it the Up-to-date Motorcycle Club, and of course each one of them held an office, Alec being president, Jack vice ditto, Freckles the secretary, and Budge treasurer.

It was their aim and intention to take a long trip the following autumn, when Alec expected to have to go South on business connected with the settling of his father's estate, he being the only heir to the property.

Meanwhile, as has been stated before, each of the other boys was saving every dollar he could command; and it was understood that the fathers of Budge and Freckles would complete their fund if they reached a certain high watermark.

As for Jack, just at present he could not positively say that he would be in a condition

to accompany his mates, or not. A great deal depended on how matters turned out in relation to the discovery of that valuable drawing; or his father recalling the essential keynote to his wonderful little invention, which, by slipping from his mind, had reduced him to a pitiable condition.

This outing afield had been arranged just to get together, and talk over future plans, as well as enjoy themselves in camp for a season.

Wonderful to relate the old automobile managed to keep up its good work until the very moment they came to the spot where they thought they ought to set up the tent for a permanent camp.

Then with a grunt it gave up the ghost again; whereat Freckles burst out into a shout.

"Now, what d'ye know about that, fellows?" he cried, as he jumped over the back of the tonneau; while Budge slowly climbed out the usual way, looking sorry to be disturbed. "We bamboozled the old machine the worst ever. Thinks it's playing a trick on us; but the joke's all the other way, for we've arrived. Easy enough to shove her into the bushes, and let her rest up for a week. Perhaps she'll carry us home better; just like horses always perk up when headed for their stable."

"Oh! not always," grinned Budge; "you for-

get our old Dobbin, and how I won that wager from you once, Freckles."

The recollection caused both Jack and Alec to emit sundry laughs; and Freckles joined in with his dry chuckle.

"That was the only time you ever got the better of me, Budge," he said. "And if I do say it, you deserve great credit for thinking up such a sly game."

The occasion had given all Staunton cause for many a laugh. Freckles had declared that the ancient horse owned by Budge's mother could not be coaxed to go five miles without the use of a whip. Budge had taken him up and when the time came for the experiment, lo and behold, the fat boy, knowing the fondness of Dobbin for sweet hay, had formed a clever plan to take advantage of this liking.

Strapping a stick down the front of the horse's head, from the end of this he fastened a nice little clump of hay, just beyond reach. Every time Dobbin tried to take a bite it seemed to retreat, necessitating his advancing a pace. And so the patient and unsuspecting creature had gone on, always expecting to come up with the hay; and covering the five miles without a single stop, to the cheering of the crowd that watched the ridiculous performance.

After that Freckles had been cautious how

he provoked his fat chum for some little time, realizing that after all there was something in that head of Budge, once it was stirred to action.

The spot where the tent was pitched was close to the lovely sheet of water known as Lake Harmony. Just back of them a sort of cliff arose at the base of which a number of trees grew, their tops sweeping the summit of the rocky rise.

It seemed an ideal place for camping, with a water view that quite charmed the heart of Alec. That cliff would also serve to protect them from any blow that happened to spring up from the west, where most summer storms had their birth.

When noon came they had the camp pretty well in order. Alec found a place to keep his motorcycle safe from possible rain; and at the same time he chained it fast, not meaning to chance another raid on the part of wandering tramp or escaped convict.

Before the afternoon had well begun, Budge was coaxing Jack to pick out the two trees up on the hillside, which he would make use of as masts in fashioning his wireless outfit. For Budge was consumed by an overwhelming desire to get in touch with some one in the home town, who could be wheedled into going around to his house in order to make sure about those

perplexing gas jets that were supposed to be burning hour after hour, day and night, to the confusion of his, Budge's pocketbook.

Being of an obliging nature Jack readily consented; and hence with both Freckles and Budge dangling at his heels, he set forth, taking the axe along; for there would have to be considerable chopping before he could start rigging up his wires.

So the afternoon wore away, and again evening drew near.

Among the other things brought along to add to their comfort in the line of food was a fine little home-smoked ham, which Budge had contributed. He was very proud of that ham, and often referred to its toothsome qualities. It had been the product of a farmer who lived on a place owned by Mr. Clifford; and even while they were enjoying the supper Freckles prepared, Budge frequently begged them not to eat too much, for he wanted them to do justice to the fried ham they meant to have for breakfast.

For fear lest some prowling animal sneak into camp and steal their meat, Freckles had even been coaxed to climb one of the trees that stood alongside the cliff, and secure the ham, together with a strip of bacon, to a crotch about twenty feet from the ground.

This was the idea of Budge himself, and he felt very proud of having conjured it up. Often he would look toward the spot where the articles in question were hidden from sight, and chuckle. It did not take much to keep Budge in good humor, apparently.

During the preparation and eating of the supper there was a delightful fragrance of cooking around the vicinity of the camp. Freckles had fetched a string of sausages along, the first of the season, he proudly declared, and it was these that they cooked, as they would not be so apt to keep as the smoked meat.

After finishing eating, the boys lay around and chatted. It was very pleasant and peaceful. Countless stars dotted the heavens overhead, and did their little part toward lightening the pall of darkness that would hold good until midnight, when the declining moon might be expected to show above the hills across the lake.

A whippoorwill called to his mate in the trees near by. Frogs croaked in a not unmusical chorus, while crickets took up the refrain.

Budge was always thirsty. He drank as much as any two of his chums. Perhaps the sausages did have an unusual amount of salt in them. At any rate, leaving his comrades, Budge picked up the tin bucket, as he casually remarked:

"Guess I'll go get a fresh bucket of water at the spring, fellows. Somebody is sure to want a drink during the night!"

Freckles opened his mouth to say something, and then resolutely closed it again, not wishing to frighten the fat boy, lest he refuse to quit the fire. So Budge, all unthinking, calmly waddled along toward the spring not far away; and ten seconds later came face to face with the crouching object that had staring yellow eyes, and lashed a long tail back and forth in a horrible way!

CHAPTER VI

LOST, STRAYED OR STOLEN!

Budge seemed frozen with horror at first. He could not move a finger, nor even find his voice in order to cry out.

There could be no possible doubt with regard to the identity of the beast this time.

He was surely face to face with the Jabberwock—the awful creature which had been haunting him, sleeping and waking, ever since he heard about its escape from the cage of the menagerie—the striped tiger from the East India jungle!

Budge never gave a thought to the fact that the animal was supposed to be fairly tame, and trained to do various tricks before a circus audience, moreover, that age had fastened on him, so that even his teeth were gone, and he had difficulty in masticating his food.

A tiger was a tiger to Budge, and that meant a ferocious beast, ready and willing to jump on a plump boy, with base designs along the line of a meal.

He could hear the big cat actually purring, just as he had often known his own tabby to do at home, only in this case the sound was much magnified in his startled imagination.

All at once he seemed to be given the power to move, and use his voice; and it can be set down as positive that Budge was not at all slow to avail himself of the privilege.

Something impelled him to throw the empty tin bucket straight at the crouching beast.

At the same time Budge let out an awful screech that might well have filled the heart of any ordinary animal with alarm.

Turning, the fat boy plunged toward the camp fire. Hardly observing where he was going he of course stumbled more than a few times, and once rolled completely over, only to bound erect again like a big rubber ball, and continue his flight. As he galloped madly along he was whooping it up at the top of his shrill voice:

"Tiger! tiger! Look out, fellows! Somebody get the gun, and shoot him! Hey! ain't you goin' to save me! Wow! I'm a goner sure! Tiger!"

Of course, at the crash of the bucket, and the very first shout he gave, those by the fire sprang up. Alec was always quick to act, and it was fine to see the way he pounced on that double-barreled shotgun that stood against the side of the canvas tent.

And the entire bunch started to run toward the oncoming Budge, joining their voices with his, until it seemed as though a battle royal must be in progress along the shore of peaceful Lake Harmony.

Once Alec threw the gun up as though half tempted to fire at some object that was slinking off, and of which he only had an indistinct glimpse; but apparently on second thought he concluded that it would be useless to wound the beast, and might bring about the very thing they wished to avoid; for after all he failed to press the trigger.

Freckles and Jack laid hands on the staggering Budge, and assisted him back to the fire. He was gasping for breath, and his eyes stuck out as though he might be wearing goggles.

"Is it gone, fellows?" he wheezed presently, as Alec came up, carrying the tin water pail, which seemed to have a great dent in it that he was pressing out.

"Now, tell me about that, will you?" exclaimed Freckles. "Has the poor chap been seeing things again; or was it our old friend, the trusty with the zebra suit, who gave the wardens the slip over at the pen?"

Budge turned on him with a snort. He was getting his breath back; and indignation began to make him forget his recent fright.

"Huh! think you're funny, don't you?" he

ejaculated. "Guess I know a tiger when I see one. Do convicts have big yellow eyes, tell me that? And say, when did they take to growling like a tomcat, and growing long tails? That's what it had, give you my word. But honest now, fellows, I smashed it over the head with that tin pail. If it ran off I claim some of the credit, remember!"

"Budge is right, boys," remarked Alec, just then. "I saw the beast making off, and it was the old tiger, all right. Besides, when he says he hit it with the bucket, here's the evidence that you can't deny."

They crowded around, and stared at the dented place, where Alec pointed out a small speck of discoloration which looked like blood; also several yellow hairs!

Budge threw his chest out with all the pride of a hero at this. His face once more took on its customary glow; while his eyes shone brightly.

"Don't laugh another time till you're dead sure, Freckles," he said, condescendingly. "Just because a fellow happens to be built with some flesh on his frame don't mean he can't grab a chance to do things. Told you all I was practicing to pitch on the scrub team next year. Guess that was a ball over the rubber all right, eh? You never made a better shot in all your life, Freckles, and you know it."

Freckles stared hard at the positive evidence of a center shot, and then held out his hand frankly.

"Shake, Budge," he said. "I never thought you had it in you, sure I didn't. Why, bless me, if I was a tiger, and got that tin bucket bang on my noggin, and heard that yell you put up, I'd never stop running under ten miles. No danger of our being gobbled up as long as your siren voice holds good."

Budge never knew just how to take his tall chum. Freckles many times liked to inject a species of sarcasm in his words that puzzled the innocent fat boy. But Budge could afford to overlook anything of the sort now. He felt that he had won imperishable glory in his meeting with that old man-eater.

During the rest of the night, however, it might be noticed that he kept close by the fire. Alec himself walked to the spring, and brought back drinking water in the dented bucket. And when they began to grow sleepy Budge crawled into the tent first, to pick out his place, which was between two other blankets.

As a hero and a warrior Budge evidently did not wish to overwork the thing. He was satisfied to let his chums reap a little of the honor, if there was indeed any more coming.

Alec laid out a scheme which would cover

the night, and have one of them on the alert all the time. Nothing happened to disturb them however. If while they stood guard any one of the three lads thought they caught mysterious little sounds near by they concluded that these must be caused by some of the prowling little woods folks—perhaps a hungry raccoon seeking to secure some of the crusts thrown away at meal time; or a field mouse stirring in the dead leaves under the trees.

So another dawn came finally. Budge issued from the tent first, yawning and stretching at a great rate, as though he might have been up half of the night, when in truth none of them could remember having heard a peep from him since the time he snuggled down under his blanket.

“Me for a dip in the cool lake!” he announced; and here he was soon joined by the other three.

For a short time they had a splashing before-breakfast bath, and seemed to enjoy it immensely. But the water was very cold, and at that early hour they found their teeth chattering; so Alec advised that they call it off. Perhaps in the afternoon another swim might come in finely.

Here was where Budge did have the laugh on his thin chum. Being so plump himself the

cold did not seem to affect him; while poor Freckles had blue lips, and was shivering as if he had a fit of the ague.

"Play the baby act, will you?" jeered Budge, quick to grasp his opportunity to rub it into the other. "Can't stand a little cold, it can't. Poor old Freckles, he's shaking all to pieces, fellows. Listen to his teeth rattle, would you? Now, what d'ye suppose a chap like that would a-done, if he met up with a big, man-eating tiger? Lucky it was me that went to get a drink! And pity the animal that ever hoped to make a meal off that rack of bones. Goin' to quit? Oh! well, I s'pose I'll just have to come out too, if none of you want to play."

All of them were, however, satisfied and they once again assumed their warm clothes, for the early morning air was indeed "nippy," as Freckles said.

"Now then, for breakfast!" remarked Jack.

"I see you're thinking of that delicious ham I fetched along," remarked Budge, casting a glance up into the tree near by, where their stock of smoked meat had been fastened so as to be safe. "Yum! yum! ain't I glad I had that bright thought, though! Fried ham and eggs makes my mouth water. Alec, please ask Freckles to go up and get it for us. He's the best climber we have, you know."

That was a bit of sly flattery, designed to put the said Freckles in a good humor, so that he would do the climbing act. He seemed nothing loth, and immediately started off, followed by the anxious gaze of the owner of the said ham.

Jack was busying himself about the fire, while Budge as usual started to get the coffee going. Many hands made light work; especially when all in camp were so willing to shoulder their share of the drudgery. That is what campers must always learn, for a shirker always puts a damper on the pleasure of an outing.

Presently they heard Freckles calling out. He had evidently mounted into the tree as directed, but seemed to have met with some sort of snag.

"Hey! where did you put that ham?" he was asking; and no sooner did Budge hear that than he started up, dropping the coffee pot in his alarm.

"Mercy! what does he want to know that for?" he exclaimed. "Answer him, won't you, Alec? Tell him to use his eyes, or we'll get him a pair of spectacles."

"I hung it right side by side with the strip of bacon, Freckles!" called Alec; and then, to the further consternation of Budge the boy aloft shouted back:

"Well, that's the funniest thing, then, for it ain't here. I've got the bacon all right, fellows,

but your bully old home-smoked ham has flown away in the night, Budge!"

"Hold me, fellows!" groaned poor Budge, "I'm afraid I'm going to faint!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERY THICKENS

"Brace up, Budge," said Alec, "perhaps he's only joshing us!"

"Oh! that would be cruelty to animals!" gasped the fat boy, following after the others to the foot of the tall tree that stood close to the cliff.

They could now see Freckles on his lofty perch. He had one long leg thrown around a limb, and was gazing down at them, a blank look on his face.

"Honest Injun now, fellows," he called out; "I ain't fooling; there's your strip of bacon just as I told you, and never a sign of any sweet little ham around."

"Then that measly old tiger got it, after all!" groaned Budge. "Oh! don't I wish I'd only hit him harder when I was about it, and laid him out. It's a shame, that's what, for me to tote that beautiful ham away up here, just to feed an old crosseyed cat that can't see to dodge a bucket even. I'm going to make that circus owner pay the damages, I tell you now."

"Be sure and don't forget that dent in our nice new water pail, Budge!" called down the boy in the tree, as if in full sympathy with the lamentations of his fat chum.

Alec immediately started to climb up. He was still far from positive that Freckles might not be trying to give them a little scare. Perhaps the tricky fellow had hidden the ham in some hollow, and was pretending not to see it.

But after arriving alongside Freckles he speedily discovered that there was not the first sign of the ham anywhere. The cord with which it had been secured to the crotch of the tree still dangled there, fast enough; but it no longer held its precious burden.

"It's gone, sure enough," Alec remarked, in a puzzled tone. "Take the bacon down, and we'll have to do with that. Lucky the thief left us even so much."

Freckles left him there unfastening the stout cord from the limb, for it had been tied in many knots. When Alec joined the mourning group by the camp fire he found that they seemed to be united in their belief that after all the tiger must have come prowling around while the camp was quiet, climbed the tree, and carried off his prize.

"I see that it's up to me to stand guard if we expect to save even our bacon," remarked Budge, who was by degrees recovering his customary spirits.

"All right then," declared Freckles, cheerfully; "we'll give you a chance the first thing. But you'll have to arm yourself with the water pail, because that's your best hold. And I guess we ought to tie you fast to a tree, for something might walk away with you, and you'd never know it, you sleep so sound."

"What interests you about that string, Alec?" asked Jack, seeing the other examining the stout cord he held.

"This is a queer thing," remarked Alec. "See this twine—it's what was tied around the ham, and to the limb. Will some of you who may happen to know more about such things than I do, tell me since when have circus tigers come to carry a knife along with them?"

"What's that?" burst out Freckles, showing immediate interest.

"A knife! Oh, my goodness, what does he mean?" cried Budge, staring at the cord as if it could speak, and answer him.

"Has it been cut, Alec?" asked sensible Jack, comprehending what his chum must have in his mind.

"Well, look at it for yourself, and tell me," replied Alec, promptly. "Here is the way it was hanging above. And you can see that the ends are not only all even, but something sharp has been used to cut the cords."

"What d'ye know about that?" murmured Freckles, almost helplessly.

"Then the cat didn't come back?" said Budge.

"That's queer, just as you say, Alec," Jack went on, with his brow wrinkled in a frown. "I sat where I could see the base of that tree all the time I was on duty, and I vow nobody could have swarmed up it without my knowing. Unless I'm mistaken you did the same; and I know Freckles took my place, for I asked him to keep an eye out yonder, especially."

"That's true; and yet in spite of all our standing guard some fellow slicked up that tree, found out our ham, and made off with it," Alec continued.

"Something mighty strange about that, fellows. If I were a believer in the supernatural now, I might think a ghost paid us a visit," Freckles suggested, making a wry face, as he winked at Budge.

"I looked all around the foot of the tree," Alec went on, "and so far I don't seem able to discover the least sign of tracks besides our own footprints."

"Then there ain't any there, because you're the boy to find 'em, if anybody can," Freckles declared.

"Say, whatever are we up against, fellows?" demanded Budge. "Ever since we started out

seems to me we've been knocking on all sorts of mysterious happenings. There's a Jonah aboard this craft, I reckon. Wonder who it c'n be!"

"Huh!" said Freckles, instantly, "you needn't look at me that way, Budge. I didn't fetch that ham along! It ain't me that's such a tempting morsel for that old tiger. Jonah! better keep quiet about that thing, if you don't want to get shoved overboard."

Freckles went on cooking breakfast, assisted by Jack and Budge. As for Alec, he wandered over to the tree again, and seemed to be casting a questioning eye upward as though hoping to find some sort of solution to the puzzle there among the branches. But later on, when the call came that breakfast was ready, he confessed that he was no nearer an answer to the riddle than before.

"Guess we'd better keep the rest of the grub in the tent," suggested Freckles, as they sat around enjoying the result of the cooking bee—crisp bacon; fried eggs, two apiece; toast that was buttered; coffee, and to top off, some marmalade, of which Freckles was abnormally fond.

"Well, now," admitted Jack, "that wouldn't be such a bad thing to do after all. If we are going to be plundered right and left by all the escaped convicts, and wild animals that have broken out of the penitentiary and circus, we ought to guard our supplies. You know it's

against our scheme for anybody to go back to town unless in case of sickness."

"Yes," said Budge, "and that's where I'm up against it, good and hard. Only for that silly promise now, what would there be to hinder me from taking the White Elephant, and finding out whether that gas is just whooping it up all this time or not? Or perhaps Alec would trust me with his motorcycle; if I'm going to learn to run one later on, I might just as well practice on his machine now."

"Talk to me about nerve," said Freckles; "what d'ye know about that? He said once I reminded him of the stone over the grave of old Peter Gazzam; if that's so, then Budge here must be like Washington Monument. I see Alec letting you go smashing over these tough roads on his Comet. It would be the last of the wheel; and they'd never sweep enough of you together to fill that blessed tin pail."

"Oh! well, perhaps Jack may get his bully old wireless going before night. Then I'll just call up Bud Perkaiser, and bribe him to run around to my house. But I tell you it's a rough deal I'm getting, boys, a rough deal. It worries me all day, and I dream about it at night."

"Listen to him, would you?" Freckles laughed. "The only thing left for me to do to help the poor old fellow out is to pass the hat. I'll drop a

nickel in to start the ball rolling. Jack, what will you give?"

"Oh! I guess I can see you, and go one better," laughed Jack.

"And here's a dime from me too," said Alec, "I just can't bear to see anybody in need without putting my hand in my pocket."

Freckles, to carry the joke out, made a low bow before Budge, presenting the hat. "Kindly accept the benevolent offerings of your chums and fellow members of the Up-to-date Motorcycle Club, with best wishes for a speedy recovery," he said.

"Thanks, fellows," remarked Budge, as he coolly grabbed the three coins, and transferred them to his pocket. "Every little movement has a meaning of its own; and in times of great distress like this even a quarter will go toward quenching a poor fellow's grief. And let me say I don't care how often you repeat the dose." Freckles pretended to fall back in a nerveless heap at such a sublime exhibition of innocence, or "cheek" as he termed it.

"Hark! I thought I heard a dog baying just then!" declared Jack, half starting up from his seat.

"There's a farmer or two back on the other side of the lake," remarked Alec, "and one of his dogs might be loose in the woods, chasing rabbits, or a fox."

"It seemed to come from back along the road somewhere. There it is again; and now I think there's a pair of them."

As he spoke Jack and Alec exchanged glances, as though the same idea might have flashed into the mind of each.

"Do they use dogs to chase escaped convicts?" asked Jack.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied the other; "but likely as not they do. I understand it's the practice in some States, and they find it works well. But we'll soon know, boys, because the sounds are coming closer all the while. Honest now, I've a hunch the beasts may be following our trail in the old White Elephant."

"Huh; guess that cranky car would leave a scent of gasoline that'd last for a week of Sundays!" grunted Freckles.

"But I don't believe any self-respecting hound would ever follow such a trail," Alec went on; "but no matter, we're going to hear all about it soon, for there they come around that bend yonder—three men in uniforms, and a couple of hounds held in leash. They're not going to leave a stone unturned but what they'll find Hans and his pal, and drag 'em back to their cells."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN THE WARDENS CAME

"Listen, fellows," said Alec, as they stood there watching the advancing trio of men in uniform. "We'd better decide just what we want to say when they ask us questions."

"About the convicts, you mean?" remarked Jack, looking a bit troubled; for he had been indulging in certain hopes of being able to run across Hans Barker, and convincing the man that he ought to tell what he had done with the paper he had stolen, the loss of which was slowly sapping the mind of Mr. Kinkaid.

"Yes, they will ask us if we have seen either of them, and we ought to give a straight answer," Alec went on.

"First, do you believe that the one who stole our ham could have been the same fellow who tried to make way with your motorcycle?" Freckles demanded.

"That's what I call a leading question," remarked Alec; "and the whole business revolves around it. If this was really a human, and not

an animal, that climbed that tree and stole our pork, then I don't believe it was the same convict."

"And in that case, Jack wouldn't like to set the wardens on the track of Hans in a hurry; is that what you're driving at, Alec?" pursued the tall boy, earnestly.

"You hit the nail on the head every time, Freckles. And my idea is that we just keep mum about the ham business. Let's tell about what happened on the road the other night. They can go back and take up the trail of the other poor scamp, commencing at the mud hole where he fell from my wheel."

"Correct, Alec," said Freckles, speaking in a low tone, for the men were now coming close. "Understand, Budge, not a word about the ham. Tell 'em of your fierce fight with the tiger if you want; show 'em the wonderful dent in the water-pail; and we'll sure back you up when you take out those three yellow hairs you're keeping in your notebook, to prove to the boys in Staunton the story of how you whipped the tiger. But mum's the word, about hams! Hold up your hand and swear."

So Budge, taking it in all seriousness, raised his right hand, and mumbled a few words as he may have seen witnesses do in the local court.

A minute later and the three wardens came

up, one of them holding the pair of eager hounds. The men were all determined looking fellows. They showed no weapons, but that was no sign they were not armed; because hunting desperate convicts was no child's play.

"How d'ye, boys?" said the one who seemed to be a leader, as he nodded his head to the campers. "Having a little outing, eh? Lots of fun too; been there myself more'n a few times. Always did enjoy it. By the way, have you heard about what happened over at the pen the other day?"

Alec took it upon himself to answer this. His chums expected it of him in the first place; and besides, he was naturally qualified to assume charge of matters.

"You mean about the escape of several convicts, don't you?" he remarked. "Well, I left town after my friends did, and happened to get a paper that had an account of the breakaway in it. So you see we know all about the affair."

"It might surprise you to hear that they took a streak over this way," went on the head warden; "but that needn't worry you any. With these smart hounds we expect to corral them before a great while. I didn't know though but what you might happen to get a squint of a pair of striped trousers in the bush somewhere, and put up a smoke, so we could come back and pick up the scent."

"Oh! that's easy, sir," returned Alec. "See that motorcycle over there?"

"Why, yes, now that you mention it; but what has that to do with the escaped convicts?" demanded the warden, curiously observing the boy.

"Nothing now; but night before last it had a lot to do with one of them," Alec replied, smiling. "The fact is, sir, a fellow who looked like a zebra, or a Royal Bengal tiger, snatched that wheel, and made off with it down the road. We chased after him in the dark. He wobbled, because he couldn't see which way he was going, and the machine actually ran away with him."

"Yes; please go on; what happened?" asked the warden, as he gave his men a swift glance as if to say: "There, what did I tell you about picking up a clue from these campers? You'll believe me after this, perhaps."

"Why, only one thing could happen; he took a header over the side of the road," Alec continued, gravely.

"I hope he didn't break his miserable neck; because I'd rather fetch back a live convict than a dead one," observed the warden.

"Well, you can, if you find him; because he had the good luck to land in the mud, and that saved him from broken bones. He disappeared, and we didn't take the trouble to hunt after him;

because, you see, sir, we hadn't lost any convict," and as he said this Alec smiled blandly in the other's face.

"Of course not, young feller," the warden hastened to remark; "you did quite right too. Dangerous work even for men, let alone a parcel of boys. Fooling with a buzz saw gets lots of people into trouble, I tell you."

"That's just what we thought," put in Freckles, anxious to have his say.

"Now, I hope you don't object to telling us where this happened, boys," went on the warden, in what he intended to be a wheedling tone. "Because you can see that we're officers of the law in the discharge of our sworn duty. These rascals are desperate men, and the longer they remain at large the worse for the community."

"Oh! no, not at all, sir," said Alec. "In fact, our little experience shows us that these fellows are dangerous neighbors. There's no reason why we oughtn't to be glad to assist officers in the discharge of their duty."

"Good for you, young fellow. Now, where was this place that one of our striped-suit birds landed in the mud?" asked the warden, eagerly.

"Have you come far along the trail—that is, did you strike in at the crossroads?" asked Alec. "Because this happened while we were camped a mile and more beyond the other lake."

"Yes, I understand. Go on," said the warden.

"There was a flimsy little bridge over a stream, which is an outlet to the two lakes. It lies in a hollow, with a long rise on either side."

"Good. I remember it well," the other declared. "We stopped to rest there late, and then came on to the lower lake to spend the night, hoping to strike a scent somewhere around there. It was at that bridge then, it happened?"

"Yes," Alec went on; "if you examine the bank just on the other side you'll see where the motorcycle went over. Follow the marks, and you'll find where he landed on all fours in the mud. That man wore a convict suit, sir. There must be a trail from that point, if your dogs have good enough noses to follow a scent."

"I see that you know something about dogs, and tracking, my lad?" ventured the warden, eyeing Alec keenly.

"A little. I spent a whole year on a cattle ranch out West, sir. But if you and your men passed last night in the open, perhaps you wouldn't object to a cup of Java right now? We can make it in a jiffy."

At that the other two allowed broad smiles to wreath their faces. Alec had noticed them looking around, and sniffing the air as though something tickled their sense of smell; and he could readily guess what that meant.

"Thank you, boys, this is right kind of you," remarked the warden, as he proceeded to drop down without further ceremony, as though he had hoped for an invitation of the sort; "and as there ain't no great hurry we'll just take you at your word, eh, men?"

"Suits us to a T," was the reply from one of the others.

Freckles and Budge proceeded to do the honors; while Alec and Jack sat there, now and then answering some question which occurred to the head officer.

"We c'n give you some eggs and bacon, if you'd like to have a mess," remarked Budge, presently; "we did have a lovely ham, you know" — at that instant he received a violent kick on the shin from Freckles, and hastened to add—"but it's all gone now," which was true enough, though not in the same sense Budge meant them to take his words.

But the three wardens declared that they had had plenty to eat, and only craved the coffee; since cold water alone was something they were not accustomed to.

Alec caught the eye of Jack, who found a chance to bend his head closer so he could hear the whisper of his chum.

"Twig the dogs, will you?" said Alec. "They keep sniffing in the direction of that tree yonder,

and pulling at their ropes to beat the band. Wonder now if they get a scent of the thief who stole our ham. Even if he didn't leave a trail that our eyes could find, the trained noses of the dogs would light on it."

"But none of them seem to notice what the dogs are doing," answered Jack.

"And I hope they'll hurry off after we've filled them full up with coffee. I'd hate like fun to have them mixing in with our business."

"That's a fact," Jack went on; "for I'd just begun to hope I might find a chance to corner my father's former employee, and have it out with him."

"Sh! that'll do now!" said Alec, who imagined the head warden was watching, as if beginning to wonder what these two boys might be whispering about.

Alec to ward off any suspicion immediately spoke up, saying:

"Was there any reward offered on account of these men, sir?"

The warden smiled as though his faint suspicions might have been set at rest by this natural query.

"Why, no, not yet, bub," he replied; "but if they ain't hooked up soon I reckon there'll be a smart sum offered to any one who gives information leading to their taking again. You see,

we don't often have our men get loose; and it's a bad thing for the institution; especially if they get clear away. But with these dogs it's going to be a hard game for Hans and Dan."

"Those were their names, just as the account I read said," Alec remarked. "How do you like the coffee, sir?"

"Elegant. Never tasted finer. It does your cook credit," smiled the warden, as he drained his cup, the third, by the way.

"Hope they'll clear out now," whispered Jack, nervously observing the almost frantic actions of the hounds as they tugged at their leashes.

The three men slowly arose to their feet.

"What ails the dawgs?" said the keeper who controlled the animals. "They act jest like they're wild."

"Must be some animal over yonder in the brush; the fool pups don't know enough to behave when they're huntin' men," grumbled the other underwarden. "Give 'em a jerk that'll pull their blooming heads half off, and come along, French. Thankee for the coffee, boys."

"May see you later!" called back the leader, waving his hand as he strode off over the back trail, followed by his underkeepers, and the excited hounds.

The boys succeeded in keeping straight faces so long as the wardens were in sight; but no

sooner had they turned the bend, and the trees effectually screened them, than Alec and his comrades indulged in a fit of quiet laughter.

"What d'ye know about that?" said Freckles, grinning broadly.

"The fool dogs knew a heap more than their masters gave them credit for," remarked Alec, as he glanced toward the tree that had been the object of the hounds' eager desire.

"Would they act that way if it was that tiger climbed up, and took our ham?" was the surprisingly smart query Budge sprang on them.

"That's a fact; and it helps to prove what Alec said, that it was a two-legged thief who hooked our pork," Jack declared.

"Well, now that that little affair is all over, what next?" Freckles asked.

"Oh! I hope Jack will take a notion to start work again on that lovely wireless rig of his," Budge sighed. "I'm awful anxious to see if he can make it work. I know it takes brains, and a good head, to do things like that; and if it was up to me I'd just be everlastingly slow getting it made."

"There are times when you do tell the truth, Budge, I admit," said Freckles, in a way that made the other stare at him, and shake his head as though he did not just grasp the full meaning of the words.

An hour later Jack was busily engaged up on the hillside, with two willing helpers ready to do anything within their power. And every now and then Budge might have been seen seated on the ground with paper and notebook, figuring out some intricate problem. He was adding ten more hours to the sum total of the time he feared those terrible gas burners had been going full blast!

CHAPTER IX

THINGS KEEP GOING

Alec was something of a fisherman. He, as well as Budge, had made sure to bring some tackle along, with the idea that a few fresh bass might prove a welcome addition to their limited larder.

"Sure we'll need all we can get," Freckles had said, when at noon Alec and the fat boy proposed trying for a mess of the gamy denizens of Lake Harmony. "The way things are slipping away from us, I reckon we won't just have anything left soon."

"What do you mean, Freckles?" demanded Jack. "Do you miss anything else besides the ham?"

"Well, that's what," grumbled the other. "We had two loaves of bread this morning, and we cut into one. You just eat up the last of that loaf now. Where's the other; tell me that, will you?"

"Where did you see it last?" demanded Alec.

"Oh! I own up," Freckles grinning said, "I was sorter careless, and I reckon I did leave

it outside the old tent; but somebody was here every blessed minute of the time. Alec, did you run across it; and are you hiding that loaf just to give me a lesson?"

"I haven't even seen it," replied the other. "Can you show us just where you left it, Freckles?"

"Right there on that stone," came the reply. "The two were fastened together, and when I broke 'em apart to slice one, I forgot the other. It's gone, all right. I've hunted high and low, and can't find a sign of it."

"I just bet some sneaking critter came into camp when Alec's back was turned, and bounced that loaf," Budge suggested, in an awed tone. "No use talking, fellows, things are happening the funniest ever. Perhaps our blankets will be hooked next, while we're asleep under 'em."

"Huh! if I was dead sure it was a real genuine live animal I wouldn't have that chill walkin' up and down my spinal column," asserted Freckles, shaking his head mysteriously, and putting on a most solemn air.

"He means ghosts," commented Budge, who was practical, even if not always bright-witted; "Freckles is forever thinkin' of them kind of things. Once he showed me a silly old rabbit's foot, that he said came from a bunny killed in a graveyard in the full of the moon. You know,

fellows, he used to live down South when he was smaller; and he got all such crazy notions from the coons. They believe in ghosts, just like the Irish do in banshees, my dad says."

"Then tell me what sort of an animal did take that big loaf of bread without a single one of us getting our peepers on the same?" demanded Freckles, not at all abashed by what his chum had just said.

"Oh! that wouldn't be so very hard," laughed Alec. "I've seen animal thieves that could do smarter things than that. Why, a 'coon could slip up, and steal the contents of a kettle, and you wouldn't be any the wiser if you sat five feet away; unless he happened to upset the tin cover. Well, it looks like our last loaf of home-made bread was gone; and I suppose we'll just have to make the best of a bad bargain."

"But I never could get on without bread!" declared Budge. "That means half of living to me. I eat it every meal, you know. No bread; and five awful days still to go! I just see myself turning into a skinny side-show freak, like—"

"Go slow," burst out Freckles; "I can stand for a heap, but look out for the last straw on the camel's back."

Budge pretended to elevate his eyebrows in astonishment.

"Did you ever see the like, fellows?" he re-

marked; "Freckles is that touchy nowadays, you can't mention any sort of an animal but he wants to take it to himself. Leave it to you if I said a word about him. What's he got to be grouchy about, anyway? Now, if it was me, there'd be some reason, with my precious cash being inch by inch yanked out of my pocket by those three terrible gas burners, that keep sizzling away, day in and day out, making the plagued old meter click and click!"

"As to bread," remarked Alec, composedly, "I could go without it for weeks, and never complain, if only Freckles might be induced to give us an occasional mess of those bunkum flapjacks he can make so splendidly."

Freckles immediately beamed with pleasure; even Budge sat up and took notice, forgetting his woes for the time being.

"Pancakes—well, I don't object to such fixings!" he declared, rubbing his hands together. "Perhaps he'll accommodate us tomorrow morning for breakfast."

"I will on one condition," said Freckles, severely; "which is, that Budge takes a vow right here never, never again to call them by that silly name, pancakes. Why, Alec here will tell you that it belongs to the nursery. In camp they'd hoot you uphill and down if you just dared to say that. Whenever you want to speak of the

staff of outdoor life call 'em griddle cakes; or better than all, flapjacks! Ain't I right, Alec?"

"Correct," came the reply, from the one who had had experience.

So Budge put up his right hand, and took the oath after Freckles, to forget his childhood training, and when among men, act like a man.

After lunch they sat around for awhile, Jack wishing to rest a bit before once more tackling the job of bringing his wireless station to a point where he anticipated getting results from the air.

Freckles and Alec were talking over some matters by themselves. From the way in which they pointed toward the tree which seemed to hold the record for mysteries, it might be assumed that Alec was trying to pick up a few points, and was squeezing his angular chum in the hope of striking "pay dirt," as he put it.

And while they sat there, Freckles suddenly cocked up his ear, while a look of supreme agony began to steal over his expressive face.

"What ails you; got a pain?" demanded Alec, really alarmed for the moment.

"I'm going to have one right soon, I tell you," advised the other; "listen, don't you hear that twanging sound? Budge has remembered that he fetched his terrible banjo along. He's going to tune up, and give us a few of his choice warblings! Have you forgot? Don't you know that

when Budge starts singing every chicken within a block runs for the coop, and gets on the roost? They think a whole army of foxes has begun to bark. I once knew an Italian organ grinder to shut up shop, and take to the woods like mad when he heard what Budge could do. There he goes! Oh! my stars! Alec, won't you please get me some cotton out of the medicine chest? I'd like to stuff it in my ears."

Every word of this was undoubtedly heard by Budge, reclining close by; but it failed to move him in the slightest degree. It was an old story with him; and somehow he had gotten it into his head that the truth of the matter was, Freckles secretly envied him the possession of his fine tenor voice, and was only saying these mean things out of pure envy.

So Budge, after twanging on his banjo for a little, and making it give forth the strangest discords ever heard, started in to do a little warbling, as he was pleased to call it.

Well, no doubt there had been known much better singers in Staunton town than Budge; but after all there might also be worse. His voice was inclined to be shrill and squeaky; but he managed to make some sort of melody. Alec of course knew that much of Freckles' misery, while the concert was in progress, was put on. He even joined Jack in applauding when the

sweet singer wound up with Annie Laurie; much to the consternation of the lanky one.

"For goodness sake, hold on, Alec!" whispered Freckles. "If you clap too much he might go back over the whole blooming business again. That would mean the quiet and cool of the bottom of the lake for me. Oh! if only I dared I'd like to puncture the head of that fine banjo for Budge. But he'd never forgive me."

"Then don't do it," said Alec. "Budge is a mighty good-natured fellow; but he'd never stand for that a minute. I think he'd climb you, all right. But there's Jack ready to start out again to work at his wireless business; and Budge is tagging at his heels, ready to do all he can to hurry things along."

But it was fated that the new station could not be completed that day. Budge had a gloomy face on him as he came in just before dusk. Even the delicious odor of frying fish, the result of Alec's labor on the lake that afternoon, failed to cheer him up.

"If the old White Elephant was only fixed," he said, disconsolately, as he sat down to supper later, "I'd just be tempted to take chances along the road back to Staunton. Never had anything worry me like this, give you my word, fellows."

"Well, it's out of the running, and Jack don't

mean to repair the same till he's got his wireless in operation; and then you won't need to go," remarked Freckles.

"And if Alec would only let me use his motorcycle," Budge went on. "Oh! why didn't I learn to ride one before when he wanted me to try? I was a fool, that's what."

"Hear! hear!" said Freckles softly.

"For two cents," Budge continued, gritting his teeth savagely, for him, "if I had a chance, I'd sneak his key to that padlock, and make the try, standing all the penalty we agreed on. And I don't see why I couldn't do the run in a couple of hours. But it's too late now, and I've just got to pass another wakeful night."

Freckles threw up his hands at that.

"Hear him, fellows, would you?" he cried. "Why, he never even turns over from the time he lies down up to when I yell breakfast; and then he comes out yawning and stretching to beat the band. But just let him try that run on the Comet. Even if he didn't take a header, and knock off a few pounds of fat, I reckon that bully old striped jungle fowl would be laying for him somewhere along the road."

"Oh! the tiger!" exclaimed Budge; "I forgot all about him."

And after that he relapsed into silence; while he kept his jaws busy disposing of the supper Freckles had prepared.

They were almost through eating, when Alec was seen to quietly reach over and lay hold of the convenient gun.

"Now," he said, quietly, "don't get excited, fellows, but there's something, or some person, creeping up behind those bushes yonder. And I mean to find out just what is moving them so. Watch what happens!"

CHAPTER X**THE COMING OF GID**

These words on the part of cool Alec naturally startled the balance of the campers. Their indifference vanished like magic. Even Budge came up erect, as though electrified, his big blue eyes stretched to their fullest capacity; and his mouth opening, as it always did when Budge chanced to be shocked.

Alec slowly swung the shotgun around until he was covering the spot where he had seen a suspicious movement of the bushes.

"We know you are there, my friend; so you'd better show yourself before I shoot!" he called out, in a clear tone of voice.

There was a brief silence. Alec dropped his cheek alongside the stock of his pet Marlin double-barrel. The action must appear highly significant, if the bushes hid a human being. Should the intruder prove to be an animal, of course there could be no result.

"Oh! it's coming!" gasped Budge.

Freckles had on the spur of the moment

possessed himself of a billet of wood that was meant for the fire; and his fingers tightened around this as he saw by a shaking movement of the bushes that something was about to happen.

"Don't shoot, Alec!" said a husky voice.

Above the bushes appeared a tousled human head of hair. Under this was a grinning face, which even Budge immediately recognized.

"Gracious! if it ain't Gid Staples!" he ejaculated.

"Come into camp, Gid!" called out Alec, as he lowered his threatening gun.

The boy in the bushes did so; and they noticed that as he advanced he seemed to sometimes limp badly, while an expression of pain came upon his face.

This big fellow was Gid Staples, long recognized as the town bully. In school he had come in contact with Alec and his friends; but Gid belonged to a lower circle than the fellows of the motorcycle club; so they seldom had anything to do with him; save that he often played on the other side when games were in progress, being a clever athlete after a way.

The others remembered, of course, what Alec had said about overtaking Gid while on his way to join them. And his presence around Lake Harmony might be explained by the fact that

he was first cousin to Hans, the escaped convict. That was a subject, however, about which it would hardly be safe to say anything just now.

When the other had dropped down near the cheery fire, he sniffed the air very much after the same manner in which those deputy wardens had done.

"Any coffee left in the pot, Freckles?" asked Alec.

Upon investigation it was found that there was quite considerable.

"Have a cup, Gid?" said Alec, with the hospitality that campers usually show, even toward their worst enemy.

"Sure," replied the other, eagerly, "ain't had a drink but water the hull day. An' if yuh got any grub tuh spare, I cud get away with some."

It happened that there was a surplus from the supper; for Freckles always cooked bountifully, never knowing the limit of their appetites.

Soon Gid was gulping down the coffee, and partaking of the food as ravenously as though he were famished.

"Look out for bones in that fish, Gid," Freckles admonished, really afraid lest the gorger choke to death then and there.

"Never bother me 'tall," grinned Gid, keeping his jaws in rapid action.

When he had cleaned up the entire visible supply, Alec, who had been watching him do the "disappearing act," as Freckles called it, with more or less admiration, thought it time to ask for some information.

"I remember passing you on the road just before dark, day before yesterday, Gid," he remarked, as a beginner.

"Yep, that was me, all right," admitted Gid, starting to light a strong-smelling pipe with a brand from the fire; and looking pretty well contented after his feed.

"But you were riding then?" Alec continued.

"Tryin' tuh ride, yuh mean, Alec," grinned the other, puffing away. "Thuh measly ole wheel throwed me just arter yuh parsed. I be'n limping along an' gruntin' ever since."

He said this brazenly, just as though he expected the others to believe him; but Gid's reputation for truth in Staunton had never been remarkable; indeed, there were those who would refuse to believe him under oath.

Two whole days had elapsed since Alec passed him; and yet he was trying to influence them to believe that all this time he had only made a few miles progress! It was more than a smart, wide-awake lad like Alec could swallow.

Besides, he had an idea that this limping business on the part of Gid might be more or less of a sham.

"Was it your leg that was hurt?" Alec asked.

"Yep, the same one I had broke a year ago; but it ain't so bad as that now," Gid hastened to say; "fact is, fellers, it don't show the way she feels. Every time I put me weight on her she squeals right smart. But I ain't one o' the give-up kinder feller, as yuh knows. I started out tuh git over tuh Mt. Holyoke, whar I gotter job with a farmer tuh help take keer o' his keows; an' I sure means tuh make the raffle, er bust!"

Yes, they had had some experience with this stubborn trait on the part of Gid, during the ball games of the past. He never gave up unless forced into the last ditch; and then only grumblingly. If that set disposition could only have been harnessed with a few other good qualities it would have made Gid a pretty decent chap, and helped him along the road to success in life.

"Now, Freckles here is the son of a doctor," observed Alec, craftily, "and he's no slouch of a surgeon himself. We always carry some medicine and liniment along with us. If you cared to let him look at your lame leg, perhaps he might ease that pain, Gid."

But Gid immediately took the alarm.

"Oh! never mind about that," he hastened to say. "Jest as I says, it don't show much 'cept a little black an' blue mark; but yuh see, it's on the same place that bone was broke; and gee! how she does hurt sometimes."

Alec said no more. He had accomplished his purpose, which was to satisfy himself that this was a story invented by Gid simply to excuse his hanging about the vicinity so long.

"Left your wheel, did you?" asked Jack.

Answered the other, as he puffed contentedly away at his corncob pipe:

"Well, after that last trick the old wreck played me I didn't have much use for the same, though I trundled her along. Made just a couple o' miles yesterday. Done better today, though. Had tuh stop an' rest every little while. Seen this fire, and thought it might be some hoboes in camp. That's why I started tuh creep up clost. Ain't safe tuh trust all them tramps, yuh know. Some of 'em's a hard lot."

Alec kept a straight face, though it was rather difficult, after hearing Gid, accounted the toughest boy in Staunton, talk in this way. Why, according to what most people believed of him, young Staples ought to find himself in congenial company with almost any gang of "Wandering Willies."

It looked as though they would have to put up with Gid for one night; since none of the boys would have the heart to send him on his limping way before morning.

"If you don't mind sleeping by the fire, Gid, you can stay here with us tonight and make a

fresh start in the morning," Alec remarked, after a while.

"All right, I'll take yuh at that. Reckon I won't bother yuh none. A little coffee in the mornin'll do a heap about gettin' me started fair. It's sure white in yuh tuh treat me this way, fellers."

Freckles and Budge managed to exchange glances. They did not say a word; but if those looks were rightly interpreted they meant that if Gid were going to stay in camp all night, they would have need of keeping up a good watch. Because in Staunton he had something of a reputation for being light-fingered.

Alec wanted time to study the fellow. He felt that Gid was not hanging around without a positive object. And for Jack's sake Alec would be glad of a chance to learn just what brought the other up to Harmony Lake. Perhaps through Gid they might yet find an opportunity to come upon the hiding Hans; and Jack would thus be able to wring a confession from the fugitive convict as to where he had hidden the paper that meant everything to the Kinkaid family, father, mother and son.

So, while Jack, Freckles and even Budge engaged Gid in conversation, Alec lay back in the shadow, and watched the play of emotions on the crafty countenance of their unwelcome guest.

He had learned lots of things during that year in the West; it had been a valuable experience to Alec Travers, which was apt to profit him many times over.

And as he sat there, keeping an eye on the rough town boy, Alec was thrilled to catch Gid several times casting a quick glance toward the very tree beyond the fire, which had so recently engaged their united attention.

It could be no accident that caused the fellow to look upward, either; but each time Alec felt positive that he could catch an eager glow on his face. He even allowed himself to survey the branches of the tree; but discovered nothing there to reward his scrutiny.

All the same Alec began to wonder if, after all, they had not made a mistake when they suspected the escaped convict of having stolen their food. Might it not have been Gid himself who, for some reason that was unknown to them just now, had done that job?

When Alec had seen the other actually send that peculiar glance toward the tree no less than four times, always with a shade of disappointment following each look, he could no longer doubt but that it appeared very much that way.

At any rate, it gave Alec a pretty puzzle to solve while he kept watch that night.

CHAPTER XI

THE FAITHFUL SENTRY

"Well, I say you were lucky one way, Gid," Budge was remarking, when Alec moved up a little closer again.

"I'd like tuh know how," replied the other, with a shrug of his broad shoulders; "seems tuh me I ain't run up ag'in anything but hard luck ever sense I started out tuh go over the hills tuh Holyoke. Say how, Budge."

"Why, that you ain't gone to make a meal for the Royal Bengal tiger that's been roaming all over the country ever since that freight train smash-up," went on the fat boy, pleased to find that there was a subject he could talk about, if he did have to keep his lips closed in connection with the visit from the wardens, and the escape of the convicts.

"What's that you're giving me, Budge? A tiger up around here, yuh say? Wow! an' me that skeered o' dogs an' sech! Looky here, ain't yuh joshin' me now?"

That caused Alec to remember that, strange

to say, the town bully, who never was known to flinch when up against big odds, and could whip almost any fellow in all Staunton, did have a singular antipathy to dogs. He had been known to shrink when a puppy suddenly ran out, barking viciously. There was some inherited weakness in his nature that he could not control.

"No he ain't, Gid," Freckles took occasion to say, joining in the conversation. "Budge ought to know. He had an adventure with the tiger. Show him what you knocked from the old striped critter's head, Budge. And with our nice new tin waterpail at that, mind you, Gid."

Thereupon the proud Budge got out his notebook, and carefully allowed the wondering Gid an opportunity to gaze upon the three yellow hairs he cherished as mementoes, or trophies of his amazing encounter.

"Them come from a tigercat?" demanded Gid, looking uneasy.

"Sure they did. Tell him about how you run on the critter lying in wait to get a good meal; and what happened, Budge," Freckles continued.

Accordingly the fat boy did so, even exhibiting the positive evidence as to the truth of his amazing tale in the shape of the dent that still marred the edge of the bottom of the tin bucket.

"All right," Gid said, as he took in a deep breath; "I'll know what tuh do case I meet up

with Old Stripes. Reckon he ain't much on the scrap after all, if he'd run just 'cause Budge yipped."

"Huh! that shows you never happened to hear Budge yip," grunted Freckles. "If you did you wouldn't wonder much that even a tiger might turn tail. I keep telling Budge he ought to grow up to be an auctioneer; or else the barker at a Coney Island freak show. But that tiger is sure old, just as you say, Gid. He ain't got many teeth; but all the same I'd hate to have him grab me."

"P'raps I better turn back, though I hate tuh the wust sort," Gid remarked. "See how I feel in the mornin'. With this game leg I ain't much use tuh a farmer; but it does sure gall me tuh give up."

But somehow Alec was of the opinion that, despite these words, Gid meant to hover around that vicinity still longer. If he had a mission to perform his natural obstinacy was apt to urge him on to carry it out.

Alec had that afternoon done something which puzzled his comrades. He had simply mentioned the fact when at supper, and left them to guess his meaning. Taking the balance of the strip of bacon he had climbed up into the tree again, and deliberately fastened the same to the very same crotch where the ham had hung, up to the time of its mysterious disappearance!

The boys may have thought this was a queer piece of business; but they had considerable confidence in their leader. And every one of them knew that in good time Alec might be depended on to explain just what he expected to prove by thus apparently flying in the face of Providence.

When the time came around for their thinking of retiring, Freckles, who had received a hint from Alec, started a second fire. This was on the other side of the tree from the one that had been kept burning all the time since their arrival.

More than ever did Alec want plenty of light, since they were now entertaining an unwelcome guest, in whose honesty no one dared put anything like trust. Why, given half a chance, and Gid might even try to run off with the motorcycle; and as this thought flashed into Alec's mind he was more than a little pleased to remember that it was chained fast to another tree nearby. Once was quite enough with Alec. When such prowlers as tigers, escaped convicts, and Gid Staples were abroad, it seemed the part of wisdom to keep a tight grip on everything worth carrying off.

If Gid thought this action queer, he at least made no remark. Perhaps he understood the cloud under which he rested at Staunton, and realized that these boys meant to keep an eye

on their property while he honored them with his presence.

"We make it a practice of keeping watch every night when in camp, Gid," Alec remarked, as the other, after picking out a place where he meant to lie down, looked with more or less wonder at Jack handling the gun.

"Oh! I see!" Gid replied, in the drawling tone that belied his customary active nature. "Reck-ons yuh 'spect that ole cat tuh walk in, an' clean yuh outen grub, hey?"

"Well, something's been getting away with things, and we want to protect our duffel," Alec chose to say.

But however Gid might suspect that his presence had to do with this sentinel duty, he made no further comment, save to remark:

"If yuh want me tuh take a turn jest say it. Yuh treated me white, an' yuh ain't got no call tuh do it, neither."

"Oh! never mind about that, Gid," said Jack, immediately.

"Yuh see, we've fixed up a regular detail for each night. Sort of military tactics. Even Budge, who isn't worth shucks to keep awake, means to hold the fort tonight for several hours, with Jack here," Freckles observed.

"Sure I do," spoke up Budge; who in reality had at that very moment been in the act of

crawling into the tent, to snuggle down under his blanket; but who could not afford to decline this plain dare on the part of his tormentor.

Accordingly, with a great sigh, he turned back, and took up his station as close to Jack as he could.

In a short time the camp was quiet. Freckles and Alec had gone inside the tent; while Gid Staples seemed to be sleeping comfortably after his fine feed. He had picked out a place a little removed from the fire. Perhaps the light, or the heat, promised to bother him if he tried to sleep any closer to the blaze; but Alec was of the positive opinion that some other reason influenced his choice of position.

Jack had found a chance to exchange a few sentences with Alec. He knew that it was his duty to sit where he could keep an eye, not only on that tree, but also on the camp's unwelcome guest. And if Gid made any move he had promised to pull a cord which Alec had tied about his ankle.

Budge sat up very stiff for awhile. Now and then Jack would address some low remark to the other, just to keep him awake.

Soon the replies began to come slower and slower. And before fifteen minutes had passed there was no answer at all. Jack bending over, found that poor Budge was sound asleep. He

lay just like a child that has been overtaken by slumber at the table, with his head fallen forward on his chest, and breathing heavily, in blissful unconsciousness of the dreadful nature of his offense, as viewed in a military sense.

Knowing the uselessness of trying to force sleepy Budge into doing that at which his whole nature rebelled, Jack made no effort to arouse him; and so the other slept on during the entire time of his supposed guard duty.

When finally Jack found that his spell had come to an end, he stepped over, and thrusting his head inside the tent, touched Alec.

The latter only smiled when he saw the sleeping sentry; for it was just what he had expected. To save the feelings of Budge he pretended to trip over the extended feet of the fat boy, who came to with a grunt.

"Hey! what you doing?" said Budge, starting up. "I ain't so small but that you ought to see me sitting here, doin' my stunt. But I'm glad it's over, and I c'n get to my blanket. This thing of standing guard ain't everything it's cracked up to be, I'm telling you."

Jack and Alec made no reply, though secretly they were both chuckling at the airs the fat boy was putting on. So Budge crept inside the tent; and when Jack followed after him five minutes later he was sleeping as calmly as though safe in his little bed at home.

The two chums had exchanged a few sentences in low tones. Alec seemed to be particularly interested in the condition of the camp guest.

"He never moved, so far as I could see," Jack reported.

All the same Alec had his own ideas concerning Gid; and when he settled down in his position he assumed an attitude that brought his face somewhat in the shadows. If Gid chanced to be watching him he could not tell whether the sentry were on the alert, or taking catnaps.

It was now past midnight. Around them could be heard the customary sounds that accompany an August night in the North—frogs held a noisy chorus in some neighboring shallow bay, or arm of the lake; crickets and katydids kept up a constant chirping, and shrill denials of guilt; an owl occasionally hooted, far back in the hills, in a solemn manner; and a whippoorwill now and then joined in with repeated cries.

Half an hour passed, and all this time Alec had maintained perfect silence; nor had he moved so much as an arm. Yet he could easily observe the spot where Gid lay stretched upon his back.

At last the watcher was rewarded for his long vigil. Surely he had seen Gid lift his head slowly, and look eagerly toward him, as though endeavoring to decide whether he could trust appearances, and believe that the sentry slept at his post, just as poor Budge had done!

CHAPTER XII

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

Slowly Gid Staples began to rise up until he had gained his hands and knees. He then started to crawl away, keeping as low down as possible. Several times he dropped flat, as though thinking that he had heard a movement behind him. But Alec was perfectly contented to watch his crafty departure, without offering a single objection.

Once he noticed that Gid seemed to turn his gaze upward into the branches of the tree. He looked as though half inclined to attempt something; but second thought must have convinced the fellow that it was likely to be foolhardy, for he shook his head, and again resumed his crawling.

Presently he reached a place where he deemed it safe to rise to his feet. Bending half over, he began to slink off. And if Alec had had any doubt before about the fellow's actions it was now wholly removed.

Gid meant to give them the slip. For some reason or other he did not entirely fancy their

society; or perhaps he had other fish to fry, and could not afford to waste any more time with the campers.

It was not only remarkable, but suspicious as well. His whole actions were those of a thief, rather than an honest boy, entertained over night by generous fellows, against whom he had many a time in the past pitted his vicious scheming.

When he was positively gone Alec concluded to do a little scouting, to make sure that the coast was clear. He therefore hastened to follow after the departing Gid.

Presently he discovered him on the road leading back toward town. The waning moon had come in sight over the hills to the east, so that it was no longer dark. Gid was making fair time, and to the amusement of Alec he had quite forgotten to limp so painfully.

"That little rest must have cured his game leg all right," said the boy who was following after the departing guest; and the idea seemed to tickle him more than a little, to judge from his chuckles.

A minute later:and he saw Gid drag something out from the bushes. It was his old wheel; and the first thing that Alec noticed was the fact that the large bundle still adorned the handle-bars. The second was that so far as he could make out the wheel did not appear to be the

wreck Gid had declared; for when the other mounted, he was able to go pedaling along the road at a fairly decent clip.

Alec was satisfied.

To his mind it was now positively proven that Gid, when he left Staunton, never dreamed of going all the way over the hills to Mt. Holyoke. He had another mission in view; and surely it must concern the presence of the escaped convict in the vicinity of Harmony Lake.

"I wonder now if our fine ham is tied up in that bundle?" mused Alec, as the figure of Gid, working his old wheel industriously, vanished in the misty moonlight; and he found nothing more to do than return to camp.

He remembered how the other had looked toward the tree where that mysterious disappearance had taken place; and was trying to figure out just why Gid would go to all that trouble and risk to get possession of their rations.

Alec walked up and down during the balance of his time as sentry. All the while he kept close watch on the tree; nor did he allow the fires to die down. Thus, when it was time for Freckles to come on deck, he could truly declare that nothing had entered the circle of firelight.

Freckles' first act on crawling forth in obedience to the summons of the one whose time had expired, was to glance keenly over to the spot

where Gid had slept. Then he turned a quick and questioning look on Alec.

"Where's he gone?" he demanded, in a whisper.

"Flew the coop while you slept," replied Alec, grinning as he contemplated the expression of mingled disgust and satisfaction on his chum's thin face.

"Good riddance of bad rubbish," remarked Freckles; "but see here, I hope he didn't get away with anything worth while. Did you see him go, Alec?"

"Yes, watched the whole performance," answered the late sentry, cheerfully; "and I give you my word he didn't take anything along but the good supper we gave him."

Then in a few words he told the story of how he had seen Gid crawl off, and after following the fellow along the road watched him mount his ramshackle wheel, to start back along the trail toward Staunton.

"If that don't beat the Dutch," mumbled Freckles, lost in wonder. "Now, what d'ye suppose that fellow wants around here? Is he hunting Hans; and has he given up the job just because we told him about that stray tiger?"

"That isn't his way," Alec replied, slowly, for he was himself unable to solve the riddle entirely. "But I don't believe Gid's turned back. That move of his was meant for another purpose.

Perhaps we'll learn more about it sooner or later; but you must keep wideawake every second of the time between now and morning."

"You just better believe I will," declared Freckles, lustily. "What with all these tigers, runaway convicts, prowling Willies like Gid, not to mention other unseen things that come in the night, no more sleep for little Ambrose tonight. Climb in now, and get your thirty winks; and depend on me to do the needful."

Alec knew Freckles to be a vigilant fellow, quite the opposite of poor drowsy Budge. And so without the slightest misgiving he crawled under the sheltering tent, and sought his blanket.

The three sleepers were aroused by Freckles' announcement that morning had come, and it might be just as well they knew the fact. Budge was quickly in the water, taking his dip; and the others followed his example, though no one stayed in long, because the lake was fed mostly by springs, and at that early hour it was like taking a plunge in an ice bath.

Once they were dressed the next thing was breakfast. Alec had told Jack and Budge about Gid's queer departure during the midnight hours; and many jokes were passed around in connection with the chances of his meeting either the roaming tiger or the warden squad with their dogs.

"Who says bacon this morning?" asked Alec, winking at Jack; whereat the other immediately set up a loud call for his favorite breakfast stay.

"Nothing like it to start you right," Jack declared. "Why, the very smell of it on the fryingpan gives me new vim. Count me in, Alec."

"That's two. How about you, Budge?" Alec went on; with some motive in view that he was concealing from his companions.

"Oh! I'm on," declared the one addressed. "Anything suits me, so long as the vacuum can be filled. Call it bacon and eggs. It might have been ham, if we'd only been smart enough to hang on to what we had."

"No growling now," Alec continued; "let's be thankful we've got the slab left. Freckles, if you don't mind doing that climbing act again, would you be good enough to bring down the bacon?"

"Sure. Climbing's good to stretch a fellow's legs," declared the other, readily.

"Then I reckon you've had lots of it in your time," called Budge after him.

Jack caught Alec's eye just then, and also an expressive uplifting of his brows.

"Do you think so?" he asked, in an aside that Budge failed to catch, as he was bending over, fixing the coffee in the pot.

"Don't know. Just waiting to see; but if it

could happen once, why not again?" was the quick reply.

"Look at Freckles shinning down the tree like a house afire!" exclaimed Budge just then, "and what d'ye think, he ain't got our bacon either!"

Jack whistled, while Alec nodded and looked grave.

"Well," said Freckles, as he landed close beside them; "I rather guess you'll have to change the bill of fare this morning, fellows. We'll try to do without the bacon part; for there ain't any!"

"Do you mean it's followed after the ham?" demanded the awestruck Budge.

"It's sure gone up the flue," Freckles went on, dolefully; "nary a sign or smell left of it, up in that old hoodoo tree. Whatever took it must have wings, because we kept an eye out every minute of the night. I'm beginning to think there's something in that ghost business after all, blessed if I ain't."

The others laughed at him, but he went doggedly to work getting the eggs ready. All sorts of suggestions flew around; but Budge stuck to the idea that it must be the tiger that was robbing them so neatly.

"Why, the blooming thing could easy jump from one tree to another, and nary a one of us see him, no matter how wideawake we kept

while on guard," he remarked, with an air of bold defiance as he looked around at his three camp-mates; just as though he might himself be the most vigilant sentry in the whole universe.

"That might turn out to be the truth," Alec admitted; but all the same his manner went to indicate that he did not himself put any great faith in Budge's pet idea.

"Oh! well, let's forget our troubles for a little while," said Alec. "We've still got enough grub to last us out; and if it comes to the worst we can break camp before we counted on doing. Freckles, here's my tin cup; please give me a helping of that fine coffee Budge made."

"Sure," replied the lanky lad, as he turned in his seat, and stretched out his hand; then the others heard him utter an exclamation.

"Say, this is going a little too steep!" Freckles cried out, a touch of anger in his voice; "a joke's a joke, but there's such a thing as carrying one too far."

Alec jumped to his feet, his face expressing positive surprise.

"Why, what ails you, Freckles?" he demanded; "what's gone wrong now?"

"Gone wrong?" echoed the other; "why Budge here is trying to get a little fun out of the thing; he's gone and hid the coffee pot, that's what!"

And as the other three stared at the stone to which he was pointing they saw that the most important object connected with a camp breakfast had indeed vanished.

CHAPTER XIII

A CLUE IN THE AIR

"Hold up your right hand, Budge!" said Alec, sternly.

"Oh! you needn't look at me like that!" exclaimed the accused member of the campers, as he bristled up with an injured air. "I never touched that coffee pot after Freckles he said it was done boiling, and put it over there on that stone by the other fire, to keep warm while he was cookin' the eggs."

"I'll say exactly the same," declared Jack; "fact is, I haven't even put a finger to fryingpan or coffee pot this whole blessed morning."

"That's the same boat I'm in," Alec spoke up, as he looked at the circle of bewildered faces around him. "Now, Freckles, are you dead sure you didn't go and put that thing somewhere else yourself, and then forgot it?"

"Say, what d'ye take me for, Alec, anyhow?" burst out the tall boy, just as indignant as Budge when he had disclaimed all knowledge of the missing vessel. "I tell you I put her right there

on that flat stone! You can see the black mark still, just where she sat. And I never touched that blooming old thing afterward; cross my heart if I did."

"Well, that's the limit!" said Jack, himself in a complete fog as to how the best part of the breakfast could have so mysteriously taken wings and flown away, while they were within ten feet of the spot.

"Somebody must have just crept up behind the tree, and grabbed it when none of us happened to be looking," said Budge; he would have tried to lay the blame on the tiger, only for fear of ridicule; for while the escaped brute had been a trained animal, Budge could not quite make up his mind whether the wonderful striped animal had ever attained a human liking that could not be resisted, for coffee.

Freckles immediately booed the idea vigorously.

"Couldn't be done, nohow," he declared. "That thing didn't disappear in any ordinary way, I tell you, fellows. I know you laugh at me for saying I've got a little weakness about ghosts, and such things; but tell me, what did take our coffee if a spook didn't? That ought to settle the matter once for all."

"Well, it looks like we're short a coffee pot, that's what," remarked Alec, coolly; "but even

that oughtn't to keep us from enjoying our morning cup. Here, hand me that kettle, Budge, and I'll try my hand at making a second batch. Perhaps I'll have better luck than you and Freckles did."

"Yes," said Budge, with set jaws; "and I'm going to sit here right through the whole operation, and never once take my peepers off that kettle. If I see any ghostly hand reaching out to grab it, you just watch my smoke. I'll whack it with this club, good and hard."

"Well, go slow now, and don't you get excited," warned Alec; "because for one I don't hanker after having a pail full of scalding coffee splashed in my face. Be sure you're right before you try for a home run, Budge."

But nothing happened; the second relay of ambrosia was cooked without trouble, and breakfast went on undisturbed. Of course there was little else spoken of save these remarkable happenings that were mystifying them all. A dozen theories were brought out, only to have holes punched in them by some of the others.

Alec managed to get Jack's ear for a moment when the others happened to be engaged in some way.

"Can't you coax both of the boys to go up on the hill with you awhile?" he asked. "I'd like to have the run of the camp alone for a bit."

"No trouble about that, I reckon, Alec," was the ready response from his chum; "but what've you got up your sleeve now? Three to one you think you've struck a clue, and just want to work it out alone?"

"That's right, Jack. Tell you about it later," was the whispered reply, as Freckles turned around, looking at them suspiciously, as though suspecting that some sort of conspiracy might be forming.

Presently Jack spoke up, just as though nothing had occurred to disturb the peace of the camp.

"Budge, I want you with me now. I'm going to make a big effort to get in touch with Staunton before night, and you can help me. Freckles, I'd like you to come along too; there's some climbing that nobody can do as well as you."

Freckles looked a trifle undecided. He scratched his head, and heaved a sigh, as he cast a glance all around the camp. Evidently the strange events that marked their stay at Harmony Lake were having a deeper effect on the superstitious tall boy than on any of his companions.

"Oh! well, if you really need me, I'll go," he said; "but to own up, I don't feel in much of a climbing mood. And I had a half notion I'd like to pry around this blooming old place, to see if there was any cracks in the rocks there, big

enough to hide a decent-sized spook. But count me in, Jack."

Before he left the camp, however, Freckles wandered all around, closely examining the ground, eyeing the neighboring bushes suspiciously, and even casting gloomy glances up into the tree that he had called a "hoodoo."

He finally tracked after Budge and Jack, shaking his head dismally, and looking very much downcast.

Left alone, Alec sat there for a little while. He seemed to be deeply interested in the tree himself, for again and again his gaze would wander in that direction, and always with more or less nodding of the head.

Finally he jumped to his feet, and walked over to the flat stone that lay close to the remains of the second fire, which they had allowed to die down after the coming of dawn.

Bending down on his hands and knees Alec started to examine the vicinity of the stone. All he could find, however, was a spot that seemed to be wet. Placing his nose close to the ground he made sure that coffee had been spilled there. That would indicate on the face of it that the thief had been in such a hurry as to upset a portion of the pot's contents on the ground.

Alec seemed pleased at this discovery, although just why he should feel so might be dif-

ficult of comprehension to one who had not as yet been taken into his confidence, and knew nothing of the startling theory that had flashed into the mind of the boy.

As he once more arose to his feet, his first act was to bend his head back, and look straight upward, as though he had conceived a sudden interest in the leaves of the tree just above his reach.

Apparently he marked a certain spot with his quick eye, as though something had caught his attention that he thought worth while examining at closer range; for he immediately began to climb into the tree.

Working his way out on the lower limb he finally reached the place he had marked. And when he discovered that there was indeed a stain on some of the leaves Alec chuckled as though pleased. He again found the scent of the coffee very positive. "Freckles' ghost must have been perched up here somewhere," he was saying to himself; "and I reckon he couldn't just resist the temptation to enjoy one more drink of his favorite beverage when on the earth. But just how did he reach down to grab it when we weren't looking? It's ten feet from here to the ground; queer sort of an old spook to have an arm that long, I'd think!"

Once more hunching himself along the sway-

ing limb Alec reached the body of the big tree. But he did not descend to the ground. On the contrary he started to climb upward.

Though he looked carefully from time to time he could not see the slightest sign of any foreign object above him. The branches were all in plain sight, and certainly a body as large as that of the tiger could not remain hidden from his scrutiny, with that bright sunlight sifting through the treetop.

Presently Alec came again to the place where the ham and bacon had been tied so securely, with the idea of keeping them away from any thieving beast or hobo.

No one had thought to ascend higher in the tree, as Alec plainly remembered. Indeed, there was quite a length of trunk devoid of limbs, and to climb upward would necessitate considerable exertion. Besides, what object would be attained by such a move? The tree reached to the summit of the cliff, and its branches actually rubbed the face of the rock in places; but Alec made sure that nothing larger than a nimble squirrel could ever hope to mount high enough to gain the top of the height by continuing up the tree.

And yet, when he came to closely examine the bark on the smooth space, he found fresh scratches, such as might be made by the soles of heavy shoes worn by a climber!

If Freckles had not gone higher than these forks, then who was responsible for these scratches? And supposing some one had actually climbed up into the treetop, what could his object have been?

Alec was up against the solution to the puzzle that had been mystifying them. He believed he saw a great light. Perched there in the tree he allowed his eyes to travel over the face of the cliff. Especially was his scrutiny severe at one point, where the largest limb above rubbed against the rock.

"I believe it could be done," he said to himself, as though his last lingering doubt was beginning to vanish under the flood of new light that had commenced to pour in upon him.

But Alec was a diplomatic sort of fellow. He did not believe in rushing things as Freckles would have done. There would be plenty of time to figure all this out so as to decide on what their actions ought to be. The one thing he had made sure of was that if there was a ledge, where that limb rubbed the cliff, any one lying on the same might have fished for the coffee pot with a line and hook; since the second fire had been directly below that particular point of contact between branch and tree!

CHAPTER XIV

FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

“Toot! toot! toot!”

Alec made use of the auto horn to let his chums know lunch was ready. He had heard more or less chopping going on all through the morning and took it for granted that Jack must be making fair progress in his job. But it was evidently proving a much more arduous undertaking than either Freckles or Budge had imagined would be the case.

They presently came down the hill in a bunch, talking and arguing, as was their wont; and all of them eagerly sniffed the savory mess Alec had prepared against their arrival, hungry after their labors.

Alec did not mean to say anything in connection with his astonishing discovery until they had broken their fast. In fact, he managed to steer the conversation in such channels that none of them thought of asking him speedy questions.

“How are you getting on with the great wireless, Budge?” he inquired.

"Fine, ain't we, fellows?" said the other; at which Freckles opened his mouth to give expression to his indignation that Budge, who sat on the ground and watched the others climb trees, should so coolly claim a share of the glory; but knowing how useless it would be to take him to task, the tall boy finally only shook his head, and sighed, as he gave Jack a queer look.

"Then perhaps you may know before night whether you've got a big gas bill hanging over your head or not, eh, Budge?" Alec went on, just for the pleasure of hearing the other strike up his familiar complaint.

"Y—es, I suppose so," said Budge; "and I tell you I'll be right glad to know the worst, fellows. It's just awful, lying awake most of the night, worrying your head off because you can't get word. It'll take me ever so long making up for the good sleep I've lost on this old hike. But then I hadn't ought to complain, when I've got such bully chums along, who know how to cook to beat the band. Just put some more of that stew on my dish, will you, Alec? My! it does go to the spot though. Never knew before how hungry the open woods, and hard work, make a fellow!"

Freckles laid down his tin platter and just looked reproachfully at the speaker. But little Budge cared. He owed this tall chum a long

string of debts for past badgering; and was just beginning to taste the sweets of getting back at him. Conditions had changed of late, and it was Budge who had begun to hold the whip hand.

Jack, upon being asked to tell just how far his work had advanced, readily complied.

Everything that had to do with machinery or inventions always interested Jack. His father had been the same before him; and the son, having started in at such an early age, gave promise of outstripping the record of the elder Kincaid, builder of the wonderful little engine that when put on the market was destined to make the name famous in the world of sport.

He carefully explained just how he had managed to get his wires stretched from one treetop to another; and finally started to adjust his instrument so as to be in perfect sympathy or harmony with the outfit of the lame boy who lived next door to him in Staunton, over ten miles away.

"And he's promised me, Alec," Budge went on, with a happy, childlike smile on his rosy face, "that the very first message that goes flickering through the air will be about my horrible nightmare. He's going to ask Bud Parkaiser to trot around to my shack, and investigate. Oh! how will I ever hold out while he's gone from the other end of the wireless? And if the right

word comes, fellows, I'm going to sing every song I know, I'll be that delighted!"

"Murder! me to the woods if he starts that punk old banjo plunking!" growled Freckles. "That sure is the most awful threat ever. It's a plain case of murder by inches, take my word for it. Begin with the swan song, won't you, Budge, so I can pass away without too much pain?"

The meal was about over by this time, and Alec thought it might be only fair to take his chums into his confidence.

"Nobody has seen fit to ask me what I've been doing all morning?" he remarked; and of course every eye was fastened on him; while Freckles' face told of newly awakened suspicions.

"I had a hunch you wanted to get us all shucked off, so you could just run the ranch to suit yourself, Alec," he said. "And I reckon you've been using up some of that stuff you picked up out on the ranch. Now, take pity on your chums, and let's hear what's doing. Say, now, you ain't got anything hid away in the tent, have you?"

"Hear him, would you?" burst out Budge with a hoarse laugh. "He thinks Alec's gone and caught that bully old ghost Freckles says is hanging around here; and chucked him inside the tent! Go on, Alec; what did you do besides

get lunch ready? I'm on needles and pins waiting to hear, because I just know it's something fine. It takes you to get things started when they begin to back water."

"Well, I think I've found out where our ham went!" said the other, smiling.

"Hurrah! and perhaps that nice strip of bacon ditto?" cried Budge.

"And our nice new coffee pot, how about that, partner?" demanded Freckles, eagerly.

"All went the same road, it seems to me; and that was toward the sky!" remarked the narrator.

"What did I tell you?" burst out Freckles. "See! even Alec has come to believe that nothing human ever got away with our grub. What could come down from the sky only a spirit, tell me that?"

"P'raps it was an aeroplane!" suggested Budge.

"Let me tell you something, fellows," Alec went on slowly. "Then you can guess it out for yourselves."

He proceeded to recount how he had climbed the tree and found evidences of spilled coffee on the leaves toward the end of the lower limb. Step by step the balance of his investigations was told; until finally he plainly expressed his opinion that some one secreted on a shelf two-thirds of the way up the cliff, had managed to

lower a cord with a hook at the end of it. Then, taking advantage of their being about the other fire, this unknown had drawn the coffee pot quickly upward, several times knocking it against obstructions in his hurry, and causing more or less of its contents to be spilled.

Budge sat there as though under a spell, listening with wide-open mouth, and his blue eyes filled with a look of amazement. Just how this bright-witted chum of his managed to discover all these amazing things filled him with more awe than the fact that some one was hiding above their camp.

As for Freckles, it was hard to know what his feelings might be. He seemed to have set his mind so strongly on the ghost theory that to have it all dragged down in this sudden manner rather made him feel disappointed. When a fellow has gone so far as to confess that he believes in hobgoblins and such things, it can hardly be very satisfactory to see ridicule brought upon his pet theory.

Jack, however, was tremendously tickled over the result of Alec's investigating turn. It could only mean one thing to him—Hans, the escaped convict, must be even then close by, and might be reached in some manner.

And that valuable paper, containing the drawing of the key to that invention which was to

make the name of Kincaid famous, as well as fill the family purse,—might it not be recovered from the one who had stolen it for revenge?

“We must get in touch with him, Alec,” he said, huskily.

“I’d like to do it the worst kind, Jack,” was the reply the other made. “But we’ll have to go about it carefully. He’s a desperate man, and would think we were trying to help the wardens capture him again.”

“That would upset all my plans,” remarked Jack, seriously. “Say, I bet he just listened to everything the wardens said, when they sat by our fire, and drank their coffee!” blurted out Budge.

“He couldn’t get down again perhaps, and just had to stay there!” suggested Freckles.

“And that’s why he hooked my fine ham; the fellow was hungry enough to eat it only smoked,” Budge went on.

“Which must a-give him a lovely thirst, with all that salt meat,” Freckles continued. “No wonder he just went wild at smelling our coffee, and made a fish line with a hook at the end to capture it, if half a chance came. I’m taking off my hat to Hans, boys. He’s the whole show. If we stayed here long enough I reckon he’d clean us out. In the end we’d see even poor old

Budge going up, kicking like fun, and yelling for help."

But the other two were thinking more seriously about the manner in which this strange discovery of Hans' hiding place might be turned to account.

"How would it do for some of us to go up the hill," remarked Jack, "and see if we couldn't get to a place where we might look down on that shelf which you believe to be big enough to hide a man."

"A good idea," Alec admitted instantly. "Suppose the whole bunch of you try it, while I shin up the tree again, and get ready to climb on the shelf from below?"

"Hear! hear!" murmured Freckles, scrambling erect, eager to be moving.

"And Jack, take the gun along with you," continued Alec; "not of course that I imagine you'll need it; but there's no telling. How about Budge here; if there's much climbing of hills to be done, he couldn't keep up with the rest."

"We'll elect Budge to be camp keeper while we're gone," suggested Freckles.

The party indicated did not know whether to feel gratified or not by this move on the part of his chums. It would of course be much nicer sitting there at his ease; but somehow Budge did not altogether fancy being left alone just then,

when the woods seemed filled with all sorts of escaped dangerous animals and men.

“All right, fellows; I’ll try to do my duty, so be off with you!” he said, in a brave tone; and a minute later he was left sole guardian of the camp.

CHAPTER XV

PATH ALONG THE FACE OF THE CLIFF

A code of signals had been arranged between the boys. Thus Alec, perched in the tree at a certain place, would understand when his chums above had glimpsed the man whom he fully believed to be hiding on the ledge, although as yet he himself had seen not the first sign of Hans.

When he heard a certain call he would know that it was time for him to climb the balance of the way; while they started to reach the ledge, if such a thing proved possible, from above.

While he was sitting there aloft, looking down at Budge in the camp, Alec amused himself with trying to figure out just what it all meant.

No doubt Hans was familiar with this section of country; which accounted for his heading this way as soon as he made his getaway from the penitentiary. He even must have known of that ledge which could be reached by means of the tree. Possibly at some time in the past he had seen a wildcat escape that way; and out of curiosity investigated.

And how about Gid—was he acquainted also with the peculiarities of the cliff face? Alec said yes to that question. The actions of Gid had proven his deep interest in that particular tree. He believed his desperate cousin to be hiding up yonder. Perhaps he had received word from Hans that if he were lucky enough to escape the watchful care of the wardens, he would make straight for this hiding place, and expect Gid to join him there, with some old clothes to take the place of his striped suit; and likewise some provisions to ward off starvation.

And Gid was doing his best to carry out his end of the compact. It was no fault of his that he had thus far failed to make connections. Circumstances that were beyond his control had prevented him from accomplishing his end.

He had gone away, but Alec hardly believed the fellow meant to leave Hans to his fate. Gid had plenty of mean qualities; but he was a good sticker; and doubtless would scorn to desert his cousin.

Alec was still trying to figure how best they could convince Hans that they did not intend to do him any harm, and were not in league with those three wardens, when he heard a whistle.

That was the signal agreed on to tell him that Freckles and Jack had reached a point above the top of the cliff, and would soon be ready to re-

port whether the thief who had stolen their provisions and coffee were indeed in sight.

It sent a strange thrill through the clinging lad perched high in the tree. He began to climb slowly upward, intending to gain a position where in case of necessity he could speedily climb to the ledge.

Then he waited, counting the seconds in his anxiety. And yet all the while he felt positive that he was right in his solution of the puzzle. Everything pointed to that one conclusion; and a short time longer ought to prove it.

Budge had heard the warning whistle too. He was standing at the foot of the tree looking up, his round face filled with a fear that perhaps Alec might meet some unexpected trouble when once he tried to land on that shelf. They had said so much about Hans that poor Budge probably pictured him as a fierce-looking fellow, more after the type of a pirate than anything else.

"Oh! be careful, Alec!" he called up, pleadingly.

He even overcame his reluctance for climbing to make a start himself at mounting the tree. Alec did not smile for he understood the sincere affection that prompted the act; although clumsy Budge was as likely to get beyond that smooth place as he was to fly.

Just then there came a shout from above, a

cry that startled Alec by its sudden outburst, and the meaning back of it:

“Hi! there he goes, Alec, along the ledge! Now’s your chance, climb like fun!”

It was reckless Freckles who gave tongue in this way. Alec knew that it was a poor thing to do, since the words could be easily misunderstood by the alarmed fugitive; who would surely believe they were trying to corner him with the intention of handing him over to the wardens.

Since the thing were done, however, there seemed only one move open to Alec; and this was to carry out his former plan by mounting upward in all haste.

He was an agile lad, and really nearly as good a climber as Freckles; so that once he took a start there was nothing to keep him from gaining the spot where the stout limb passed close by the line of discoloration which he had decided marked the ledge.

Reaching it quickly, Alec, without hesitation drew himself up. No one opposed his coming; and so far as he could see at first glimpse as he arrived, the shelf was utterly devoid of human occupancy. There was a half eaten ham, the balance of their strip of bacon, part of a loaf of bread; and the missing coffee pot; but the convict had vanished.

And as Alec stood there looking about him,

filled with astonishment because of the disappearance of the one whom they sought, he heard a strange scratching sound close by.

Turning his head he was just in time to glimpse Freckles, as that elongated individual came down the face of the cliff, holding on to a rope which was evidently fastened somewhere above.

Then Alec remembered that it was at his own suggestion the two boys had taken a stout line along with them when starting up the hill. Doubtless they were now making a good use of this in order to join him. Yes, there was Jack just starting on the downward trip; with the handy Marlin double-barreled gun slung over his back by means of the strap.

Freckles was panting, whether from excitement, or because of his recent violent exertions, Alec had no means of knowing. But even a scarcity of breath never caused the tall lad to hold his tongue.

"He dived along this way, Alec; we saw him crawling off as soon as he understood you meant to climb all the way up," and with these words Freckles started to lead the way to the left.

He was so excited that he stumbled, and might have had a narrow escape from taking a thirty foot tumble, only that this comrade gripped him fiercely by the arm.

“Go slow, Freckles; you’d break your neck if you took a header from here,” Alec exclaimed, sternly. “Yes, I see now what you mean. There’s a narrow passage along past that place. I hadn’t noticed it before. And if Hans could crawl along such a shelf we ought to be able to. But be careful. Here’s Jack and the rope. Wait, I’ve an idea that ought to work. Give me the end of that rope, Jack.”

Holding that in his hand he found he had all the support necessary; and could easily pass the perilously narrow neck. Once across, he allowed the rope to leave his possession. It swung quickly back, and was gripped by Freckles. Thus one by one the trio passed the danger point.

“Fasten the rope around a rock, Jack,” called out Alec over his shoulder. “We may need it again to get back; you never can tell.”

Jack caught the meaning of what his chum said. If after all they found that the passage along the face of the cliff could not be depended on to bring them to a point of safety, it would be wise to have a way of retreat open. They ought not imitate the Romans of old, who, when they landed on hostile shores, made it a point to burn their boats, or their bridges, behind them, so as to impress upon the soldiers that it was to be a case of victory, or death.

“Here, take your gun, Alec,” said Jack, as they

started on again, this time with Freckles bringing up the rear.

Alec was not averse to feeling his favorite weapon again in his hands; though he did not dream that he would find any need of the gun, unless it might be to awe the fugitive convict into allowing them to come up with him.

Slow progress followed their start. At times it seemed positively dangerous; and more than once pieces of the rock broke off under their hands, to go plunging to the ground below.

A shout from underneath attested to the fact that Budge was keeping track of their progress.

"What's he calling?" asked Alec, turning his head.

"He says he saw the man just then, and that he's only a little way beyond. Keep moving, fellows, and we'll close with Hans yet," Freckles replied; for he happened to have the best ears in the party, and could hear as well as any jack-rabbit.

Evidently Hans was in something of a panic. Believing himself to be closely beset, he was making a desperate effort to escape over a route that, at another time, he would have hesitated to attempt. And every little while a crash of stones ahead proclaimed that Hans too was having his narrow escapes.

Once the noise was so tremendous that all of

them believed the fugitive convict must have indeed gone down with the rocks; but upon asking Budge, who being below could see better what was taking place, they learned that, while he had hung suspended for a few seconds, the man had finally succeeded by a desperate effort in drawing himself up again.

“But I reckon he lamed himself, fellers,” called Budge; “because he drags his left leg after him while he crawls. Hey! stop that, will you? What’s eating you?” and Budge could be seen dodging several good-sized rocks that were being hurled savagely in his direction by the fugitive, who had grown tired of having his every move commented on by the fat boy.

After that Budge held back, and kept an eye out for flying stones; since one had just missed his head by a few inches.

Alec, however, pushed on with renewed zeal. If what Budge said were indeed true, and Hans was suffering from strained tendons, they ought to be able to overtake him.

CHAPTER XVI

CONVICT AND TIGER

"Hurry! oh, hurry! He's getting away, fellows! He's off the ledge, and whooping it up! I don't believe his leg was sprained after all. Quick! get after him!"

That was Budge of course, keeping his chums posted as to the progress of the fugitive convict. The going was much easier now at any rate; and consequently Alec increased his crawling pace, with the other pair keeping close on his heels.

"I see him!" exclaimed Freckles, all of a sudden.

"And here we are at the end of the shelf!" observed Alec, who had been hoping for such a thing to hasten along.

"Now we can skip along faster, anyhow," remarked Jack; who was plainly worked up to a high pitch of excitement, as he considered what the tremendous result of this chase might mean to the dear ones at home.

Freckles could have outdistanced either of his mates, for he jumped from rock to rock with

the speed and accuracy of a Rocky Mountain bighorn goat; but while he thus kept a little in the lead, the long-legged boy was not so very anxious to overtake Hans, alone and single-handed.

Still, he was in a position to keep the climber under almost constant surveillance; and in this way he possibly saved the others more than one false move.

Hans certainly was not lame, no matter what Budge had said at first. Desperation doubtless helped to give him fresh speed, for he managed to get over the rough ground in a surprisingly quick manner.

"Are we going to lose him after all?" gasped Jack, in dismay, when he found that after ten minutes of this sort of work they had not drawn a particle closer to the other; and, if anything, were being slowly left in the lurch; for Hans, being desperate, often took chances at which they shied, choosing rather to go around.

"Oh! I guess not," returned Alec, with the idea of encouraging his comrade; but truth to tell he himself began to doubt whether they would be able to overtake the fleet-footed fugitive; unless some unlooked for accident stopped his swift passage along the hillside.

There could be no doubt concerning his identity. Every time they caught sight of him it was

to note the fatal striped trousers which he wore, having cast his convict coat aside.

"Perhaps if I could only make him understand me I might get him to stop, and let us come up," Jack went on, fearing very much that he was about to be cheated out of victory just when it had seemed within reach of his eager grasp.

"It couldn't do much harm to try," was Alec's brief comment.

And so Jack started to call as lustily as his lack of breath would permit. But while the sound of his voice undoubtedly must have reached the ears of the man in the van, he gave no indication of any intention of stopping, or even holding up in his pace.

"It's no use," declared poor Jack, presently. "He doesn't understand what I'm saying at all. Perhaps he thinks I'm shouting all sorts of terrible threats; for you saw him shake his fist back at us just then. Oh! if only there was some way to butt in ahead, and cut him off! Can't you think of anything, Alec?" for he knew that as a rule his chum was very fertile in resources.

But this time there did not seem to open up any possible scheme that might give promise of results. They could only keep up the chase in the hope that Hans, being weak from lack of food, would tire out, and allow them to overtake him.

"Oh! what a bully good chance to pepper him, if you wanted to try!" exclaimed Freckles, at one time, when the runaway convict happened to come into full view, as he started across a little open spot, with a clump of rocks beyond.

"That would be a fine thing to do, wouldn't it now?" Alec replied with more or less indignation; "just remember, Freckles, that it's a human being we're chasing, and not a wolf, or even a red fox. Hans may get off scot-free for all of me, before I'd ever pull trigger at him."

"That's right," echoed Jack, "though I guess if any one ought to hold a grudge against him, I might, after what he's done to my dad. But let's keep after him, boys. We don't know what is going to happen."

"No," said Freckles, somewhat abashed at his being taken to book by Alec, "and we ain't going to give up the ship till the last plank goes down. Oh! say, would you believe it, his crony's waiting up for him over yonder!"

"What d'ye mean?" demanded Alec.

"That's right, and you can see his striped coat up there on the rocks just ahead if you look close. Hans knew where he was headin' for all the time, I guess. And now we'll have both critters to handle, which is going to make things more interesting, according to my notion."

Alec uttered a startled cry.

"What ails you?" demanded Freckles. "Ain't I correct? Don't you see them zebra stripes lying on the rocks? He's waiting for Hans to come along. What makes you act like that, Alec? Sure you see what I mean, don't you?"

"Look again, Freckles," said Alec, in a horrified tone; "and you'll see that the striped thing you thought was the coat of the other convict is the side of that horrible old tiger!"

"Great governor! Alec, you're right it is!" ejaculated the other. "Oh! what's going to happen? Hans is running straight into the trap, and like as not he don't know it. Somebody whoop it up and warn him; my voice is knocked all to flinders."

Both Jack and Alec thereupon shouted at the top of their voices.

"Hans, look out for the tiger! Ahead of you on the rocks! Drop on your face, or he'll spring on you. Get down, Hans! Tiger! Take care!"

But the fellow evidently could not make head or tail of all this shouting; he seemed to only understand that those who had been chasing him so furiously were making some sort of new threats; that possibly they meant to take a shot at him, and were warning him to that effect.

At any rate Hans seemed more intent on dodging that anticipated shot than anything else; he twisted around every little cover he could find,

bent low, jumped sideways when in the open, and altogether gave proof that it was not his intention to be made the target for a handful of shot, if he could avoid it.

"Oh! it ain't any use!" cried Freckles, seeing how things stood. "He's just running straight into the claws of the old beast. Look at that tiger watching him, and getting ready for a jump. Talk about his not having any teeth; he's enough to just scare a fellow half to death from his looks. It's coming, fellows; hold your breath now, and let's hope Hans can dodge his jump."

The three boys involuntarily stopped still as they watched to observe what was about to take place in front of them. Hans was still pushing across the little opening; but had now almost reached the other side, where that clump of rocks reared itself up.

And the big cat was evidently just about ready to launch himself into the air, deeming his intended victim within springing distance. Once free from captivity the trained circus tiger had evidently gone back to his former natural state of living, and meant to secure a meal after the primitive fashion much in vogue among his wild jungle relations.

"Oh! my!" cried Freckles, suddenly.

The tiger had jumped! One moment they saw his gleaming yellow-and-black-striped body

flashing through the air; and the next he had landed apparently full upon the escaped convict, whose rapid advance had finally brought him within the zone of the jungle beast's spring.

Apparently Hans had had not the slightest suspicion of danger from in front up to the second he saw the terrible tiger in midair, heading his way. Alec had his eyes fastened upon the man. He saw the shrinking that overtook him when the first intimation of his peril came.

Perhaps that involuntary backward movement had something to do with what followed. It at least served to cause the springing tiger to partially miss his aim. Instead of striking Hans squarely, as had evidently been his intention, the beast came upon the man in such a manner that he failed to crush him under.

Freckles gave a shout, and even made some sort of forward movement, as though in his impulsiveness he would attack the huge beast single-handed, rather than allow him to maltreat the wretched Hans.

He found his way blocked however, by Alec, who had thrown the Marlin up to his shoulder. The action was so significant that even Freckles understood; and in consequence brought his own forward movement to a speedy pause.

The blow inflicted upon Hans, while not all that the tiger had intended, was severe enough

to throw him sideways. He fell down the face of the hill nearly a dozen feet, and there was danger that in so doing he might have broken his neck.

But sometimes what appears on the face of it to be a disaster, really covers a blessing. This tumble opened the way for Alec to fire, since the tiger was for a few seconds separated from his intended victim.

Jack, crouching there in the rear, and watching with strained eyes, saw the striped creature poised where he had landed after missing his victim by such a narrow margin. The animal evidently hardly understood just why things had turned out so poorly for him; but having already sighted poor Hans floundering below, was crouching again to follow up his first tactics. One mistake could not deter a hungry tiger from trying again, apparently.

But Alec did not mean to allow this to happen without a vigorous protest from his side of the fence. He had been averse to peppering the savage beast with bird shot lest the only result be to turn his attentions toward them; but the case now admitted of no fine argument. Hans' very life stood in the balance. And so the boy, taking a quick aim at that plainly marked side exposed to his marksmanship, pulled the triggers of his double-barrel, once, twice!

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT HAPPENED TO HANS

The double report roared through the valley of Harmony Lake, making as great a sound as though a cannon had been discharged. At that distance the small shot undoubtedly separated, and spattered the flank of the crouching beast. None of them could have done much more than inflict a severe sting; but the sensation might have resembled the circus trainer's lash, under which the striped beast must have cringed roaring many a time.

Freckles again burst out into a shrill scream; and the others joined in immediately. There was no method in the chorus of boyish shouts, save that noise might help to intimidate the hungry animal and keep him from turning upon them.

Alec boldly started to run toward the spot, waving the now empty Marlin above his head; and not to be outdone the others followed as closely at his heels as they could, all continuing to let out the greatest assortment of football

yells ever heard in a closely contested school game.

The tiger had made a quick leap as the gun sounded, and he felt the sting of the scattered bird shot. For just a brief three seconds he looked ferociously toward the advancing trio, as though almost tempted to accept the gauge of battle they had thrown down.

Then something about their appearance must have given him what Freckles denominated a bad case of "cold feet." He suddenly turned tail, and with an almost cowed demeanor started to slink away.

"Look at him, would you!" shrieked the excited Freckles. "He's running away like a whipped dog, with his tail between his legs! Go it, Old Stripes! Hunt for your dinner in another quarter, and good luck to you. Hurry up your stumps now; for we like your room better than your company!"

He only ceased shouting in this strain when the beast had utterly vanished from view, being swallowed up in the bushes, again cheated of his intended prey.

The three boys immediately hurried to the side of the fallen man. Hans had made a desperate effort to regain his feet after landing, doubtless fearing that the beast by which he had been confronted meant to follow up his first at-

tack. The attempt, however, proved useless; and Alec realized that in his fall he must have broken one of his legs.

As the three lads gathered around the escaped prisoner he glared at them angrily, as though the leading thought in his mind was that he owed all his new troubles to these lads.

"Are you badly hurt, Hans?" asked Jack, with considerable of anxiety, and also sympathy in his voice, as he bent over the other.

"Oh! just a leg broken, that's all," replied the other, bitterly. "Leave me here and let that beast come back to get his dinner. I might as well do some good in the world; and I reckon I'd nigh as soon be in the stomach of a hungry animal as locked up in that stone jug for the rest of my life."

"Freckles, it's up to you to examine, and see if what he says is so," said Alec; and then turning to the man he went on: "this boy is the son of Dr. Codling. He knows something about hurts. Just let him look, and see what's wrong, Hans. Then we'll try and get you to our camp the best way we can."

The man did not make any reply. A look as of surprise and wonder gradually crept across his face, as though he could not exactly understand what this sort of generous treatment meant. He turned his eyes on Jack, whom of

course he had recognized, for the boy had often been in his company during the time he was working as Mr. Kinkaid's assistant, and before the quarrel that ended in his stealing that priceless drawing.

Freckles quickly saw what was the matter. When he looked up his thin face betrayed considerable uneasiness.

"It's a compound fracture, all right," he admitted, "and a pretty bad one too. I'd like my dad to have hold of this case. Of course I'll do all I can; but it's a matter that if neglected too long might mean serious trouble."

Hans of course heard every word. He gave a bitter laugh, as though he had steeled his heart against betraying emotion of any kind.

"Oh! don't hesitate to say it right out—younger!" he cried. "In so many words you mean I'm likely to be a goner. All right. In that case I'll cheat the wardens that have been hunting me like a wild beast these four days. I've had my fling, and made a bad mess of it. Let her come; you won't see me flinch. I'm game to the finish. Better leave me right here, fellows; it'll save a heap of trouble."

"You know we couldn't do that, Hans," said Jack, as he looked down upon the miserable wretch with pity beaming in his eyes. "We'll make a sort of rough litter and get you down to

the road some way. After that it won't be hard to make our camp where you can be comfortable while somebody goes for the doctor."

"And that means I'm going to fall back into the hands of the wardens, who'll have it in for me because I give 'em so much trouble," said the man, grinding his teeth savagely. "Don't you send for any doctor, I tell you! Leave me somewhere, and let me take my chances. Perhaps I might have a friend come along, who'd look after me till I could limp around. And if the big cat does come back to finish me, why, it might be in the way of a blessing after all."

Alec motioned to Jack not to answer the man. He saw that Hans was bitterly opposed just then to their sending for a physician; and yet Freckles knew full well that unless some such aid as this were brought before long, complications would be apt to set in that might cause Hans' death.

They hunted around, and finding several poles that could be fastened together so as to make a rude but effective litter, Hans was tenderly raised and laid upon this.

Despite his courage, and determination not to show the white feather, the pain of even this movement was so intense that the wounded convict could not wholly suppress a groan; though he bit his lip until the blood came in the effort to keep this evidence of human weakness back.

Then began the task of getting him down the side of the hill to where they knew the road would be found. After working along the best they could for awhile their eyes were gladdened by glimpses of the beautiful sheet of water through the trees beyond.

"Nearly there, fellows," announced Alec, as they strained and puffed under the burden. "We're doing finely; just keep it up a little longer. I saw the road right then, and we're close by it. Once again to the breach now; and go slow, so as not to joggle Hans more than we can help."

No wonder the sorely wounded convict could hardly believe his ears. He had only a right to expect that the son of the man he had wronged so terribly would feel hatred, and nothing more for him. And yet, if he had been a boon companion of these manly young fellows, they could not be more solicitous about moving him without causing more pain than was absolutely necessary.

Again and again did his eyes follow the movements of young Jack. Memory was evidently carrying him back to former scenes, when this boy and himself had often been together, tossing ball or fishing it might be. And perhaps a great wave of regret and repentance had started to sweep over the hardened convict, that ere long might prove of tremendous importance to the fortunes of Jack Kincaid.

The warmth of the sun caused the traveler to shed his coat, where the violence of the wind had only made him gather it more closely about him. Some men can be melted by kindness who would scorn to yield to the most terrible torture. Hans might be one of these.

Presently they reached the road, and every one breathed a sigh of relief. After that the going should be much easier.

"We'll have you there inside of ten minutes now, Hans, perhaps in five," said Freckles; who as the only authorized "doctor" in the group, was supposed to be in full charge of the rescue party.

"Tell me one thing," said the man on the litter, his curiosity getting the better of even his pain, "what sort of a critter was that beast? Looked to me like a striped tiger, only I never heard of such animals running loose in old New York State."

"It was a tiger, an old circus trick animal," replied Jack. "A railroad smash-up the other day liberated several wild animals; and the trainers have been hunting high and low for them ever since. Our chum, Budge Clifford, ran up against the same beast the other night, hiding in the bushes near our camp; but he scared him off by his yells. I suppose the old tiger is nearly starved now, and that would account for him tackling you."

“Well, he’d have had his dinner all right, I guess, if you boys hadn’t been on hand,” muttered Hans. “And I’m trying right now to understand whether I ought to thank you, or curse you. Either way I’m up against it good and hard; a meal for the beast, or back to my old cell.”

He relapsed into a surly silence; but continued to watch all that Jack in particular did. And in this way they presently came in sight of the tent and camp fire.

Budge had of course heard something of the shooting, and the tremendous yelling. The poor fellow was on needles and pins ever since, not knowing what might have happened to his three chums. No doubt he imagined every terrible thing that could possibly have come to pass; and the silence that followed that last mad chorus filled him with liveliest anticipations of evil.

Armed with a tremendous club Budge was standing as close to the fire as he could get; because he had read somewhere that wild animals dread the flames; and really, how was he to know that the escaped circus beast might not invade the camp, now that his fighting spirit was aroused?

A shout down the road attracted the attention of Budge, and to his extreme delight he saw his chums coming along bearing a mysterious burden on a rude litter.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOWING THE SEEDS OF KINDNESS

"I think I ought to get away, and bring Dr. Codling up here, Jack," said Alec, as the two stood together a short time later.

"Wait a bit, and see what Freckles says again," returned his chum. "He's taking another look at the broken leg, and this time can find out better whether it's as bad as he thought before. Hans is dreadfully set against our doing it, you know; and if we persist, it may set him against me. I was just beginning to hope for good news, from the way he keeps looking at me, as if he wanted to say something."

"All the same," said practical Alec, firmly, "if the man's life hangs in the balance, I think I ought to go, come what will."

"Yes, that's true," sighed Jack. "I wouldn't stand in the way, no matter what happens. If Hans died I'd never forgive myself for being selfish, and thinking of my own benefit at his expense. But put it off as long as you can, Alec. Meanwhile I'll take Budge off with me. The

wireless is so near completion that it ought to be looked after. Besides," he added, "it will keep my mind from too much worry."

"What's that you say?" demanded Budge, who had come up just in time to catch the last few words.

"Come along with me," said Jack, smiling. "I've got a hunch that perhaps we may get in touch with Bud Perkaiser in Staunton before another hour goes by. And you know you made me promise that the very first thing I'd ask him would be about your affairs. Want to go along with me, Budge?"

"Do I?" cried the fat boy, excitedly. "Well, I never felt more like keeping company with anybody in my life, not even Susie Lambert. Just think what this means to me, and the money that hangs in the balance? And perhaps, after I've found out how the land lies I'll be able to get some sleep nights."

This last was flung out as a defiance to Freckles, who happened to be approaching them just then. But for once the lanky youth chose to utterly ignore the challenge. Freckles' face was serious, as though he were charged with grave responsibilities.

"How about it, Freckles?" asked Jack.

"Yes, is he as badly hurt as you thought first?" demanded Alec.

Freckles shot a glance over to where the wounded convict lay, as if to make certain that Hans was not watching them. Then he nodded his head.

"It's sure a bad job, fellows," he said, soberly; "and as I said before, I'd be better satisfied if dad were only here to take charge of things. I know something about setting broken limbs, of course, but this is a compound fracture, and I might make a botch of it. I just don't dare tackle the job."

"Still, Hans is strongly set against having one of us go after a doctor," remarked Alec. "He knows of course that if he's taken to town he must fall into the hands of the wardens again. But I don't see at all how that can be helped. Wish I did. I'm really sorry for the poor chap."

"Would it make much difference if we waited an hour or two?" said Jack.

"I don't believe it would," Freckles replied; "but what's the object of that?"

"Oh!" said Jack, with considerable feeling; "I was thinking that perhaps Hans might by that time sort of get reconciled to what must be, and give his consent. That would keep him from getting mad at me, and refusing to speak when I ask him what he had done with the stolen drawing that means so much to my poor father."

"Yes, and then again you might have your

wireless working by then!" exclaimed Budge. "In that case, you see it would be easy to send around to Freckles' house, and get word to his dad that he was wanted up here."

Freckles, however, shook his head vigorously at that proposal.

"Tell you what, fellows," he declared; "I'd much rather somebody went to see my father. If you send a message he'll never begin to understand what it's all about, you see. Consequence is, he'll believe that something terrible has happened to me; and all the way up here he'll just worry to beat the band. I know him too well to believe anything else. If we conclude to send, let Alec go on his motorcycle. He can make it in a jiffy, couldn't you, old fellow?"

"No doubt of that," assented the one addressed, readily enough. "And fellows, suppose we let things drift for an hour or so. Then if Hans stays in the same humor I'll slip off without him seeing me, and go for help."

"But promise not to start without seeing me first," remarked Jack, wistfully.

"Ditto me," echoed Freckles; "because I can tell you just where you're apt to get in touch with my dad, who will be out on his circuit of calls."

"All right, fellows," said Alec, "I'll give you my word not to start without you being on hand. And while the two of you are up on the hill at-

tending to the wireless station, Freckles and myself might be trying to make Hans see things in a different light."

"Hope you do, Alec," said Jack, as he squeezed his chum's hand, and then turned hastily away, so that they might not note the tears that welled up in his eyes at thought of the vast importance their success or failure might assume in the carrying out of his plans.

So Jack went on up the side of the hill, with Budge "toddling" at his heels, as Freckles always put it. In his mind the stout youth never walked like ordinary people; but "toddled," "rolled" or "ambled." Freckles was very expressive when he started to describe things, and had a fund of queer words that seemed to be part and parcel of himself.

With Alec he again approached the wounded man.

"How're you feeling now, Hans?" asked Alec, as he bent over the figure that was covered with the blanket.

"Pretty rocky, I reckon, bub," replied the man, upon whose thin face there seemed to rest an expression of agony that he could not wholly conceal, no matter how he set his teeth together, and brought his will into play.

"Freckles, here, says he's done all he knows how for you," Alec went on; "but the break is too

serious for him to monkey with. We wish you'd change your mind, Hans, and let us bring Dr. Codling up here. I can spin down to Staunton in next to no time on my motorcycle, you know. And the chances are the pain will get much worse if night comes on without your leg being attended to. Besides, you need some sort of stimulant to stand the thing."

But Hans shook his head, and growled his dissent.

"If the doctor comes," he said, bitterly, "he'll just have to let the authorities know what's been going on up here, and they'll get me again. Because you boys never could keep it back; and the doctor would refuse. Better for me to die, and end it all."

"But stop and think, Hans; you can't get away from here, you know; that's utterly out of the question," Alec went on, quietly.

"Oh! you needn't tell me that, younker; guess I know it only too well," complained the wounded convict, bitterly.

"I only said that," continued Alec, softly, so as not to arouse the man's anger further; "because as you know the wardens are hunting for you all over these hills. By this time I suppose they've got your companion; and sooner or later they're dead certain to turn up here again in our camp. So you see they'll find you anyhow; and all your suffering will be for nothing."

Hans seemed to digest that, for he remained silent awhile. And all the time he kept thinking he was watching the faces of the two lads, as though trying to understand what their motive might be in treating a wretched escaped convict with so much kindness.

Alec believed he had sowed the seed, and that presently Hans would experience a change of heart. So he nodded his head to Freckles, and they left the wounded man alone for a time.

"If there's anything we can do for you, Hans, just call out," Freckles said in parting; "if you think you'd like a cup of hot coffee I'll be only too glad to make it any old time. Jack told me to do that. Jack hasn't forgotten how you and him used to be great friends. He feels right bad about you being hurt."

With that Freckles turned away; and yet Alec's keen eyes had caught something on the pinched face of the convict that gave him hope. It was a tear stealing down his cheek; and physical pain had never caused it to flow either, of that Alec felt positive.

"That was a splendid center shot you made, Freckles, my boy," he remarked to the lanky chum, after they had left Hans. "And given a little time I honestly believe it's going to tell on him. I wouldn't be surprised to hear him call us over any minute, to ask me to start for Staunton.

Better be coaching me about your dad's circle of visits, so I won't lose much time."

Accordingly Freckles made a little list of places which he knew his father was apt to follow up, placing the possible time against each.

"Just use the phone the minute you get to our house," he said. "They generally keep in touch with father; and he often calls up to know if anybody wants him in a hurry. It's a way doctors have nowadays. They find the phone mighty handy in their business, I tell you."

They remained about the camp for nearly an hour. All that while nothing was heard from Hans. He lay so still under the blanket that Alec even thought the man might be asleep; but Freckles, who had stolen over once to see if he could do anything, came back with the report that he was awake, and suffering very much; yet apparently still averse to giving in.

Then came the voice of the wounded man and both boys hurried across to his side.

"Will you have the coffee now?" asked Freckles, eagerly. "I've made a pot, and a warm drink may refresh you, Hans."

"Pretty soon, bub," replied the other, nodding and trying to smile; "but I didn't call you over for that."

Freckles fell back, and allowed Alec to come in between.

"Do you mean that you have decided to give me permission to go after Dr. Codling, and bring him up here to relieve your pain and set your leg, Hans?" he asked.

"I've about made up my mind I'm pretty much of a stubborn fool," replied the other grimly. "You boys have been mighty kind to me; and after what I did to the father of Jack, too. I never was treated so white, never. And up to now I've always tried to make myself believe I was glad of what I did. Yes, go bring the doc, if you will, Alec. P'raps it's better I spend a few more years in the stone jug than drop off like a dog here and now. I might have a chance to turn over a new leaf if I lived; and I ain't fit to die, I know that. So go when you feel like it, boy; I don't object any more."

His face was screwed up with the pain his broken limb gave; but Alec believed he saw a new light there; and somehow a lump seemed to almost choke him as he thought of what this might mean for his dear chum Jack.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Hans," he declared. "You can understand that we didn't want to set the wardens after you. We knew you must be around here somewhere, and that the man who tried to steal my motorcycle was the other escaped prisoner. Jack said he'd never lift his hands to get you retaken. But I'll start off right away."

Hans turned his face aside so that they might not see the expression that had come upon it; a man of his caliber looks upon tears as a sign of weakness, and is ashamed to have it known that he ever shed one.

"Don't forget," interposed Freckles, fancying that Alec was about to rush off without any more ado, "that you promised Jack you wouldn't leave without seeing him."

"I don't," replied the other, as he unlocked the chain by means of which his motorcycle had been secured to a tree, to prevent its being stolen by any wandering party who fancied its looks; "Suppose you start up, and let them know, Freckles. Seems to me something is going on up yonder, for I've been hearing considerable of noise, as though Jack had managed to get his telegraph working."

"Yes," replied Freckles, quickly, "and listen to that, would you? No need of my climbing up there, when I hear Budge toddling down to camp with one continuous cheer making the echoes across the lake wake up. Alec, sounds to me like Jack had done more than got his wireless working all right. Budge has heard from home, and he sure seems tickled at the news! Here they come, and look at Budge dancing all the way, would you, the sportive elephant?"

CHAPTER XIX

VIA WIRELESS

When Jack led Budge up the hill he did so from several motives.

In the first place, he knew the fat boy was really wild to hear from home, and have his fears about that mounting gas bill set at rest, one way or another. For, while Budge might be joshing Freckles every time he mentioned his lying awake nights, unable to sleep because of his disturbed state of mind, he was actually more than curious to discover the solution of this light or dark mystery.

Then again, Jack himself felt the strain of being kept on edge regarding the decision of Hans. If the convict determined to make a confession regarding what he had done with that precious missing document, what great joy he, Jack, would experience as he rushed home with the grand news?

Last of all, though hardly less important than the other causes, Jack was keen on the subject of his wireless working. He had as yet never

built a station; and there was considerable speculation in his mind as to whether he had succeeded in fulfilling all the conditions that would spell success.

Taken all in all, then, Jack himself had more than a little on his mind as he thus led his stout chum in the charge up the hill, bent on snatching a victory over space and atmospheric conditions.

Budge had considerable difficulty in keeping at the heels of his more nimble comrade; and more than once begged him to slacken his pace a trifle.

"Just please remember, Jack," he would say, pleadingly, between pants, "that all fellows are not patterned on the same model. I happen to carry more heft than you; and it ain't such a picnic for me to get over ground. Of course I expect to get there, all in good time. But what's the sense of hurrying so? Rome wasn't built in a day, was it? The more haste the less speed, they say. Oh! hold on, and give a fellow a chance to wheeze."

Despite the difficulties under which poor Budge was laboring, he managed to arrive on the scene of action but a short time after Jack landed.

The latter was already at work. He had arranged a little cabinet or tent at the bottom of one of his tree masts. Some spare canvas had supplied the material for this enclosure; and

inside the booth Jack had installed his instruments on a rude little table, where he could sit and get busy.

There were some little things to be done before he could make his first test. Budge was of course next to useless in so far as climbing went; for he never could have "shinned" up one of those tall poles, as Freckles declared, had his life depended on it, even when footholds, in the shape of convenient blocks, had been nailed all the way to the apex of the great staff.

But he could squat on the ground and offer advice to the worker; that is the privilege of every wideawake American boy; and Budge was never averse to injecting his personality into any game, no matter how ignorant he might be of the rules.

So, while Jack ran up and down his tall ladders, adjusting his wires, tuning up his instrument, testing his batteries, and in various ways getting ready to make his first "try-out," Budge asked numberless questions, and gave much unsolicited advice.

"The boy who knew" made it a point to cheerfully answer all the former; and utterly ignore the latter; so that after all Budge had his fun, and no damage ensued.

As time passed, however, Budge began to grow very impatient. His complaints became almost

pathetic. He besought his chum to have a little consideration for him; could he not see how he was shrinking visibly, because of the nervous tension under which he was laboring?

"I solemnly declare that if this keeps up much longer I won't be able to even cast a shadow, I'll have wasted away so much," he went on. "Please, Jack, say that you're nearly done with all that jumping up and down business! Goodness me! if a fellow has to do all these stunts to be a wireless operator, no thank you, count me out. I know it is a shame, and that it must mean a great loss to the world of science; but Jack, I really couldn't stand so much exertion."

Just then his companion dropped down for the tenth time; only now he stepped over to the little booth. And as he went he beckoned to his mate, knowing that words were hardly necessary in that case.

Immediately Budge jumped up to follow after him. For once, had the observing Freckles been present, he must have found no adjective at his command such as "waddling," "ambling" or even "toddling," to describe the progress of Budge. He actually ran or bounded—it is true, after the manner in which an india rubber ball bounds; but he was nevertheless close at the heels of Jack when the young wireless operator swung into his canvas cabinet.

"Don't tell me you're actually going to try out the blessed old contraption, Jack?" he exclaimed, with rapture thrilling his voice. "Oh! my! oh! me! ain't I just too glad for anything though. Perhaps then, in ten minutes or so we may be annihilating distance, and talking through the mysterious air with Bud Perkaiser in Staunton! Speed the time! But don't mind me, Jack; get busy, please!"

Of course Jack was too much occupied with what he was doing to pay any particular attention to what Budge said. He knew that the other liked to hear himself talk only too well; and while at times there was a vein of wit running through the crossfire of conversation Budge could keep up, in moments of intense suspense the flow of words passed in at one ear and out at the other with Jack.

He was busy at his bench, manipulating his key.

As soon as the snapping reports began to come, Budge ceased chattering, and in an attitude of mute admiration and eagerness, watched operations; starting with each renewed volley, and then holding his very breath when Jack seemed waiting to see if there were any reply.

Thus several minutes went past, with nothing doing on the part of the other youthful wireless operator in the distant town.

"It ain't going to work, I'm afraid, Jack," groaned poor Budge, allowing his hand to steal toward the pocket where he kept that fatal notebook, in which stood the awful figures representing his actual, or estimated loss, in dollars and cents, should his worst fears be confirmed after he reached home again at the end of the outing.

"Don't be too sure of that, Budge," smiled the other. "He may be out, you know."

"But that don't sound reasonable," declared the other, dismally; "because Bud promised you he was going to just haunt his snugery up under the roof, beginning with the second day after we left. He's just crazy to get talking with somebody; and yank messages down out of the air."

"Well, it's getting on toward lunch time," continued Jack. "Perhaps Bud has been called down to take a bite. He ought to have set his signal in that case, so he could know he was wanted at the key. I'm going to call 'B. P.' again. Listen, now!"

Once more came those fiery flashes, with the sharp reports that told how well Jack's batteries were doing their appointed work. Budge, with suspended breath, eagerly awaited the outcome that meant so much to his peace of mind.

Jack ceased, and hiding his head in the hood waited to ascertain whether his call could have reached the lame boy in Staunton.

All at once there started a furious clamor.

"Jack! Jack!" shouted Budge, jumping at least six inches from the ground in his tremendous excitement; "he's on! Bud is answering you! Listen to him rattle it off, would you? Don't he just know how to jabber, though? Bully for Bud! I always said he was going to get the hang of things. Ask him, Jack! put the question to him, and let's know the worst. Anything is better than wasting away to a shadow with suspense."

Jack jerked his head free from the hood, and glared at the noisy Budge.

"If you want to hear yourself talk just step outside, Budge," he remarked sarcastically. "But if you expect me to hold a conversation with Bud, button up your lips, and don't even whisper."

"Oh! excuse me, Jack; I'm dumb! Not another peep while you're talking," replied the fat boy, in sudden contrition; for it was seldom that quiet Jack spoke so sharply.

For a little while then, flash seemed to answer flash; and Budge stood riveted to the spot, amazed at the thought that his chum was actually holding a conversation with the other boy miles away; and with only the air as a conductor of sound.

Then the rattling volleys and the flares sudden-

ly ceased. Jack's face appeared from under the hood, beaming with delight.

"It's sure a fine success, Budge," he said. "Why, we just chatted as if both of us were only calling across a room. Bud is tickled nearly to death, because this is the very first chance he's had to pull a message from the skies."

"Yes, of course," said Budge, nervously, for a terrible fear had suddenly seized upon him that in the great delight over the success of his plant Jack might have forgotten the tremendous interest he, Budge, had in communicating with the home town just then. "But Jack, I hope you mentioned to Bud the little friendly service he might do for me, if he could only get around to my house, and take a peep in my den?"

"To be sure I did," smiled Jack, rubbing his hands like one who is satisfied with the returns, after putting much hard work into a job.

"And, Jack, what did Bud say?" the fat boy went on; "was he agreeable? I sure hope he didn't think it was imposing on him; because you see, he's lame; and our house chances to be at some little distance from yours and his."

"Oh! that wouldn't be like Bud," returned Jack. "He's one of the nicest and most accommodating fellows ever. Besides, you know Bud gets around on his wheel just about as well as the rest of the crowd. He laughed a little at

the nice pickle you got into; but you wouldn't begrudge him that fun; all of us have done the same."

"Sure, it must be funny to everybody else; but it's mighty serious to me now, I'm telling you. Then he said he'd go, did he, Jack?"

"Why, Bud was only too glad to be of service to you," replied Jack; "and by this time I reckon he's just spinning along through old Staunton, headed for your house. Sure he can find the key there, are you, Budge?"

"Did you tell him under the carpet at the head of the stairs on the top floor?" asked the fat boy, and upon his companion nodding he went on: "he just can't miss it, if he's got eyes, Jack. But I'll be all in a quiver till you get him on the wire—no, that ain't what I mean—till he starts to throwing words across space again. I hope it won't be long."

He had to move outside the booth in order to walk up and down, being unable to wholly contain himself there. Minutes dragged as never before for Budge, who kept up a constant stream of talking with himself, now and then groaning, as he consulted his little nickel watch, and found that the second hand appeared to be standing still, to his excited imagination.

Would the lame boy ever get back? Could he have met with some accident that was going to

interfere with the report so anxiously awaited by the stubborn Budge? Or was it possible that Bud was that stupid he could not look far enough under the carpet in order to find the necessary key?

Then the thrilling sounds began to once more issue from the booth. Budge lurched forward, and leaning over Jack, waited until there was a lull, and the face of the operator became visible.

"Tell me, did he get to my house?" demanded the fat boy, clutching Jack's arm.

"Yes," answered Jack; "and climbed all the way to the top floor; but although he pulled the carpet up, and struck matches to look, he couldn't find the key!"

Budge turned white, and clapped his hand to his head.

"Oh! what tough luck!" he groaned. "I must have taken it down, and put it away in my other trousers; the only time on record that I was so forgetful. Whatever will I do now, Jack?"

"Wait," said the other, quietly; "give Bud some credit for smartness, when you hear what he did."

"Burst in the door?" ejaculated Budge, excitedly.

"Not quite so bad as that; but he found he could look through the keyhole; and just see things dimly in the den; for, Budge, it was almost

dark there with those heavy green shades pulled down!"

"Almost dark!" cried Budge, a huge grin wreathing his rosy face. "Then my worry was all for nothing, and I did put out the gas! Hurrah! the country is saved; and my money will go for a motorcycle, and not blooming gas bills! Hurrah!"

CHAPTER XX

THE FLIGHT OF THE COMET

"Jack did it, fellows!" bellowed Budge, as he came rushing down into the camp; while Freckles and Alec stood there, laughing heartily. "He harnessed the air currents, and talked with Bud to beat the band. Oh! the experiment was a howling success, all right!"

"So we see!" observed Freckles grinning amiably and suggestively.

"Well, what d'ye expect a fellow to act like, when he's just had the best news ever?" demanded Budge, not offended in the least.

"Are we to judge from what you say that you did turn off those three gas burners in your den at home?" Freckles went on, with a touch of curiosity in his manner.

"Sure I did," replied Budge, loftily. "I'd been a silly fool to have left 'em burning. Bud, he looked through the keyhole, and found the room all dark. And so that hard earned mazuma is going toward my new motorcycle like Alec's here, and not to swell the gas company's

coffer. Yes-siree, I'm feeling fine and dandy, thank you! I have got a mind on me after all."

To observe Budge one would think he was the victor in a battle that decided the fate of a nation, he strutted so much. Jack was observing him with a queer twinkle in his eye that attracted the attention of Alec.

When he could draw his chum aside he demanded what it meant.

"You know something that you are keeping from Budge," he said. "I'm on to your game, Jack, old fellow. Now, out with it, and confess. Did Bud find the room dark, and were the gas jets turned off?"

Jack fairly snickered as he nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Then what do you find so funny about the matter, tell me?" Alec continued.

"Why, you see," said Jack, "as Bud was coming down the stairs, he met Budge's mother; and naturally had to mention to her what sort of a message I had sent to him over the wire."

"Of course; Bud would want to explain why he was rummaging in the Clifford house, while Budge was away. And what then?" asked Alec.

"She laughed!" replied his comrade.

"Because her precious hopeful had been so

needlessly worried about leaving his gas burning, when it was out all the while?" demanded Alec.

"Not at all; but because he had done that very same thing!" Jack whispered.

"What?" cried Alec.

"'Sh! don't look so surprised," said Jack; "for Budge might turn his eyes this way, and get suspicious. He was so dreadfully tickled at the first part of my report that I just didn't have the heart to tell him the rest. Let him enjoy himself. We'll take up a collection, and pay the bill if it comes to it; but after all, I reckon his ma and pa won't be so cruel as to charge him up with the waste gas."

"But I don't understand," Alec protested; "you just said Bud looked through the keyhole, and saw the den in darkness, with those heavy green shades drawn down! How d'ye make that out?"

"Why, you see it was this way," his chum explained. "Bud had asked his mother to sew up one of the pockets in his best trousers; so this very morning she happened to remember about it. And for once he had left the key to the den in a pocket of those very same trousers, so that she came across it."

"And went upstairs," Alec laughed; "to see if the den couldn't be cleaned up during the

absence of the owner; wasn't that it? Don't I know these good mothers, though, even if I haven't got one myself, worse luck. You nod as if I'd struck oil first clip. And she found the burners turned on?"

"Full tilt, the whole blessed three of 'em!" Jack whispered.

"Oh! my! then he did forget, after all? Look at him strutting around as if he had built that wireless all by his lonely? It would be a shame to take the wind out of his sails. Yes, you're right, Jack, let poor Budge get all the pleasure he can out of it while we're up here. But, gee! what a fall there will be, my countrymen, when he gets home, and learns the awful truth."

"And you and I," said Jack, "can wink at each other every time he starts in to do his little boast, because we're behind the scenes, and know what an empty shell he's hugging to his poor old breast."

"How about telling Freckles?" asked his chum.

"Not on your life," came the immediate reply. "He could never hold in when he felt one of his fits of nagging come on; and the consequence would be that more of Budge's short vacation would be spoiled. No, let him be happy while he may. The trouble will break loose soon enough. But now tell me, Alec,

has there been any new development here?" and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the spot where the wounded man lay under the blanket.

"Yes, and I was just hoping you and Budge would come down, when I heard him set up that awful whooping," replied Alec.

"Do you mean he has given his consent that you go for Freckles' father, the doctor; and that there'll be no need of your sneaking away?" asked the eager Jack.

"That's just it, Jack. Between Freckles and myself we managed to work upon the feelings of Hans. He shows signs of breaking down; and if you just keep doing all the little things you can to make him easy, without saying a single word about what object you have in view, I believe, Jack, that before we see the last of him, Hans will speak the words you're just wild to hear!"

"Oh! you give me a delightful thrill, Alec," said Jack, in a voice that vibrated with emotion; "and don't I just hope it may turn out that way? I'll try and not bother him, just watch over the poor old chap. After all, perhaps Hans may be as much sinned against as sinning. And if he ever gets another chance, he might turn out a different sort of a man."

"I believe he will, from what I've seen of

him. But, Jack, I hadn't ought to stay around here any longer. The sooner I make a start, the quicker Dr. Codling will be able to hop up here in his new car."

"Will you come with him?" asked Jack.

"Not in any car for me, when I've got this dandy motorcycle," declared Alec, as he went over to examine his mount, and see that everything was in order for a speedy run to town.

"Hey! Alec, what's to hinder you getting another ham, and fastening it on your bully old Comet?" called out Freckles, just then. "You know we're some shy on the grub question right now, owing to circumstances over which we had no control. And while you're about it, pick up a couple of loaves of fresh bread at the bakery; and if you could get your good old guardian to let you have a couple of tender chickens, why bring 'em along too; we'll enjoy picking the bones first rate."

"Hold on!" cried Alec, looking up in dismay; "talk about Budge wanting to load us down with all sorts of traps, you take the cake when it comes to things to eat. Now, what d'ye think I'd look like, running through the streets of Staunton with all that truck tied around my wheel? They'd take me for one of Sherman's bummers, out on a foraging expedition. The chief of police would sure run me in, thinking I was trying to clean the old town out."

"But the ham he gets won't be the same as that lovely home-cured one I contributed," remarked Budge, with a sad shake of the head.

"Well, beggars mustn't be choosers," Jack laughed; for under the new and more cheering prospect he was beginning to feel more like his old self, and believe that presently things might turn out better than he had even dreamed would ever be the case.

"Nothing else anybody can think up for me to do when in town?" asked Alec.

"Why, it just seems like we've been away from home a whole month," declared the fat boy; "but then that is because I've been so dreadfully worried all the blessed time, and laying awake nights, while the rest of you snoozed to beat the band."

"Oh! yes," broke in Freckles, quickly, "the band was here, all right, and going full tilt. I could make out the shrill sound of the fife, and the deep boom of the bass drum. Budge has got it all down pat when he chooses to gurgle and snort and wheeze in his sleep. The Staunton brass band would go and hide its head, if ever its members camped out with him!"

"If you just happen to pass my house, Alec," Jack said, "you might drop in to tell mother and father that I'm all right. Father is some interested in my first attempt at a wireless, and

would be pleased to know that it worked bang-up."

"And I'm dead sure my people would be glad to hear from their dear beloved," Freckles remarked; "so when you find the governor, be sure to tell him to let ma know I'm sitting up to my three square meals a day. That means I'm right well, thank you!"

"I see my finish if I have to scour the whole of Staunton like a messenger boy," laughed Alec. "But never mind, fellows, I'll do my best to accommodate you all. We certainly ought to have more supplies, after what happened; and since it's a case of sickness that sends me to town, I might as well kill two birds with one stone; or half a dozen while I'm about it."

"That's the stuff," laughed Freckles, patting Budge on the shoulder; "cheer up, Budge, you're going to have fried ham, and boiled ham, ham croquettes, and ham in every old style before we're done with this Camp Surprise."

"Is that what you named the camp?" demanded Budge.

"Well, what could be better? Just look back, and you'll see that it's been one long surprise ever since we landed here; and then some," declared Freckles.

"Why, yes, so it has," mused the other;

"first, the strange mystery of the ham; then the bacon and the bread, and finally the vanishing of our dandy coffee pot; and the finding of him up there on the shelf."

"Oh! you're forgetting lots of it," said Freckles, immediately. "How about your surprise when you suddenly faced that striped yellow and black boy in the bushes, tell me that? And then the sudden coming of Gid gave us all a shock; as well as his absence when we woke up in the morning to find him gone. Can you think of a better name for our camp, Budge?"

"I own up; I acknowledge the corn. It's just a bunkum name. And how it will thrill us to remember all the great times we've had here," Budge confessed, in his usual frank manner.

"Not to mention the greatest surprise of all, when you found that you'd done the right thing, and put out the blooming gas on leaving your old den," added Freckles; upon which the fat boy involuntarily puffed out his breast, and his cheeks ditto, with a consciousness of pride, to the secret amusement of Jack and Alec, who knew upon what a false foundation this haughty spirit rested.

"Yes that capped the climax," Budge observed, calmly; "as they always say when a really great thing has come to pass. But Alec

is ready to start, fellows. Every one of us wish him a safe journey and a speedy return."

"Laden with spoils, that will keep us in good trim to the day we break camp," remarked Freckles.

Alec went the rounds, shaking each one's hand gravely, as though he meant to be absent for a month, instead of a couple of hours at most.

"Some time you must let me try that machine, old sport," said Budge, as he watched the other get ready to start off; for the motorcycle, being an up-to-date model, it was not at all necessary to run with it and jump on, as in other days; for the engine was a free running affair, and could be controlled from the seat like that of an automobile.

"All right, I promise you," said Alec, when the powerful little engine began to throb eagerly as though anxious to have him start. "Because, if we're all going to make that trip down to North Carolina this fall, after the rest of you get your new wheels, you ought to know how to control such a machine. Well, ta-ta, fellows. Keep an eye out for the doctor; and look after Hans as if he were one of us."

Alec purposely raised his voice with this last sentence; and a movement of the blanket told him that the wounded man must have heard his words.

With a little volley of explosions the motorcycle started down the road, Alec having to pick his way between the many obstructions. But he found a chance to wave his cap back at the watching boys, and answer the cheer they sent after him.

"The finest fellow, barring none, that ever came along the pike!" said Jack, with sincere affection in his voice.

"That's right," declared Freckles earnestly, for he too was very fond of Alec.

"My! I forgot to tell him to keep an eye peeled for Stripes," remarked Budge, in an uneasy tone. "I hope now he don't happen to run across that hungry old tiger; because if he does, there might be something doing; for the poor beast has been cheated out of his dinner so many times he must be nearly crazy for grub! I hope Alec don't meet up with him, that's all."

But Alec did.

CHAPTER XXI

PITY THE POOR TIGER!

When Alec started on his reliable motorcycle to make the run back to town, he really had but one idea in view. This was to make as good time as possible, consistent with reason.

For some miles, until the crossroads had been reached, in fact, the going would not be all that one might wish. Ruts had been worn in the road by the summer rains; and there were multitudes of stones of various dimensions that must be carefully avoided lest he meet with an accident, and take a header.

But strange to say Alec never once considered the chances of his running across any other type of peril. For instance, it is doubtful whether he even gave a single thought to the bane of Budge's life, that escaped tiger.

He waved his cap back toward his cheering camp-mates, as has been told. After that he settled down to the task of navigating his course, winding in and out by a dexterous manipulation of the handlebars of his machine, just as though he might be marking out an intricate pattern.

When he came to the bridge where the fellow had met his Waterloo, after running off with the Comet, Alec smiled broadly.

"This is one of the luckiest spots I know of," he remarked aloud to himself, as he stopped, and jumped from his machine. "Not once in a thousand years would a fellow who had stolen a motorcycle pick out such a nice soft place to plunge into, after shooting off the road. Not a scratch to the wheel; and I guess he wasn't hurt himself. Mud is of some use after all."

It was not idle curiosity alone that caused him to thus make a brief halt in his journey toward Staunton. He wished to ascertain whether the wardens with their dogs had taken up the trail here; and if so he could give a pretty good guess as to what had happened to the second escaped convict by this time.

The marks were plain enough, showing that men and hounds had crossed the tracks in the mud. Alec having made this discovery only gave a sweeping look around; but the silence of the hills was unbroken, and nothing could be seen or heard to tell whether the men from the penitentiary had been successful or not.

Satisfied, he once more resumed his journey. Mounting the long rise down which the thief had coasted when making off with the Comet, Alec found himself due for a little run of the

same type. Only for the thick trees he might have had a fine view from this point. The hills were mainly behind him now, for he had covered considerable distance; and presently, upon striking the crossroads, would find himself upon the almost level plateau given almost exclusively over to farming, and upon which Staunton itself lay.

It was when almost half way down this long descent, and going at a pretty fair pace, considering the difficulties of navigation, that Alec received a sudden acute shock.

He happened to be looking somewhat ahead, with the idea of grasping the possibilities that awaited him in the balance of the descent, when something moving alongside the road caught his quick eye.

Once again he recognized the presence of those well remembered stripes that seemed to mark all escaped prisoners, whether from circus cages or State penitentiaries. Some object had given a jump, as if to reach a point a little closer to the border of the road!

Alec knew instinctively what it meant. Twice already had he seen the roving tiger, and by this time he surely ought to be able to recognize the beast. Cheated of his anticipated dinner a few hours previously by the coming of Alec and his chums, and the racket they made

having scared him off just when he had Hans at his mercy, the animal had taken to lying in wait near the road.

It almost seemed as though some supernatural intelligence had warned the beast of his, Alec's coming. By making a sudden leap upon the passing rider of the motorcycle he could kill two birds with one stone. It would not only open up an opportunity for the long delayed dinner; but at the same time avenge his recent burning pain when the birdshot punctured his yellow and black hide.

Alec might have brought his machine to a halt even while speeding down the grade, since the power of his brake was supreme. He did nothing of the sort, however.

In the first place, his progress was so rapid that even though he succeeded in stopping, the momentum would be sufficient to carry him almost to the fatal place where his enemy lay in hiding.

Then again, another plan had flashed into his active brain, just as though it came as a brilliant inspiration.

Had he not seen how even the king of the jungle bowed to the terror of noise? Did he not remember of a case where a musician belonging to a regiment out in India, becoming lost, and suddenly faced by a man-eater tiger,

had greeted the beast with a series of screeches from his trumpet; which salute sent the animal, cowed, about his business?

Well, what was to hinder history repeating itself? He did not happen to possess a trumpet, or even a drum; but how about the horn attached to his motorcycle; could he not manipulate that valuable affair in such a fashion as to emit a series of almost diabolical screeches and other sounds, calculated to throw any ordinary animal into a fit of apprehension?

Any unusual noise will scare a wild beast nine times out of ten. Familiarity with the same takes away from his alarm; but Alec found no reason to believe that even a trained circus tiger would be well acquainted with the latest improvement in automobile horns, as applied to a motorcycle.

One hand released the handlebar, upon which he had been maintaining such a tense clutch, so as to be ready for the shock in case he struck a loose stone while in the act of coasting.

He threw on full speed, and at the same time opened his muffler; so that there suddenly broke out a series of ear splitting shocks, following each other in rapid succession.

Nor was this all that free hand accomplished in the shortest space of time imaginable. Clutching the horn, he proceeded to cause it

to give vent to the most hideous assortment of shrieks and groans that ever welled from the alarm box of a mile-a-minute racing motorcycle.

The din was terrific. Alec knew that if he meant to baffle the tiger, now near the point of desperation through a lack of its customary rations, he must bring to bear every variety of sound possible. And looking back at a later date he was of the opinion that he must have succeeded fairly well in this task.

Of course his momentum was instantly increased by the fact that he had thrown on more power. And with a jump the Comet commenced to just whiz down that easy grade. If he came up against no obstruction calculated to give him the worst upset of his whole career, Alec might consider himself fortunate indeed. But it was not choice but stern necessity that compelled him to take these desperate chances.

A second, two of them perhaps, and he was now close upon the spot where he had seen "Old Stripes," as Freckles was pleased to call the tiger, crouch down to await the coming of his prey.

If anything, Alec added to the noise; his intention was good for this at least. And naturally his very heart seemed to feel a cold chill when he saw a flash of those brightly barred sides in the air.

The tiger had jumped; but not toward him! Frightened by the terrific racket, the again baffled brute was compelled to flee once more into the shelter of the woods, and nurse its gnawing hunger until some new chance for satisfying the same came about.

Alec gave vent to a shout of triumph as he saw which way the wind blew. All his fears vanished, just as the mist disappears before the rising sun. There was no longer any danger lest the beast could overtake him, even though it experienced a change of heart. His speed was far too great for any tiger that ever lived, and three times so for an aged, toothless beast, a captive for many years.

Flying like the wind down to the base of the descent, and only concerned now as to the possibility of a disastrous spill, Alec counted himself extremely fortunate in having thus put his enemy to flight for the third time.

"If those circus people would only come along now, I might give them a pointer or two about their prize exhibition," he laughed, as he struck the bottom of the long hill, and proceeded to reduce his really terrific speed by half. "After so many disappointments that poor old chap would welcome the bait of a trap, and go back into his cage gladly, if there was only a haunch of tough cow meat as a temptation."

From that time on the running was smoother; and presently Alec found himself at the cross-roads, where Freckles had had his remarkable adventure with the ghost that turned out to be only a cow with a white face.

He laughed as he swept past the guidepost; for Jack had told the story of how the lanky chum straddled that object, and shouted for help.

"Now what the dickens is that coming up the road?" remarked Alec, as he turned to the left, and prepared to open up again to the limit of his engine, since he was now on a good road.

The strange object was a mile or so away. At first he thought it was a hay-wagon, and then he decided not. Even in the late summer time it was not infrequent that the motorist met such a vehicle on the roads around Staunton; but they were invariably headed for the town to find a market, and never away from there.

"I declare if I don't believe it's a van of some sort; but it's hardly big enough for one of Rafferty's moving wagons. Oh! I wonder now, if this can be the old-time home of Stripes?"

A minute later, and he had cleared half the distance between himself and the advancing vehicle. Then all doubt was removed, for he saw that it was a wagon with iron bars on the sides, and carrying half a dozen men.

Alec held up his hand to let them know he wanted to speak; and managed to drop off his motorcycle at the point of contact.

"Looking for a stray tiger?" he asked, cheerfully.

The circus men stared at each other in astonishment.

"Because if you are, I can tell you where he was only three minutes or so ago, not more than five anyhow!" Alec went on.

"Bully for you, young feller!" exclaimed one of the brawny men. "We've been on the hunt for old Nero three whole days now, and was just going to call it off. They's a reward of fifty dollars for anybody furnishing information that leads us to capture him. Just let me have your name and address, and I'll see as you get the flimsies, if so be your clue pans out well."

Thinking of the help that amount might be to Jack in the purchase of his motorcycle, Alec did not refuse to give his address, as at first he was half inclined to do. Then he quickly sketched the three little adventures they had had with the prowling tiger.

After closely describing the scene of the last bout, so that the men would have no difficulty in finding the spot, and commencing operations, Alec declared he must be going along.

They thanked him heartily, and looked al-

most happy over the improved prospect of recovering the trained animal that had for years been so big an asset in the successful tours of the circus and menagerie recently showing in Staunton.

And now it was but a bite for Alec, mounted on that fast flying Comet, to eat up the remaining distance separating him from the home town. Soon the outlying buildings began to come into view. Swiftly he passed them by, and kept on until he found himself in the neighborhood of Dr. Codling's house.

Of course the physician was not at home; nor had Alec expected to find him thus easily. Entering he quickly told the mother of Freckles that all was well up at the camp; but the presence of the doctor was urgently needed in order to set the broken leg of a man they had chanced to come across. And for that reason he wished she would get him in touch with her husband as speedily as possible.

Of course, like all mothers, Mrs. Codling began to suspect that there might be something which was being kept from her.

"Tell me again, Alec," she said, nervously, "that nothing has happened to Ambrose, and that you are not deceiving me."

"I give you my word, Mrs. Codling," he said, seriously, "that it is just as I say. Freckles

has done all he can for the man; but the case is very serious, and he wants his father to take charge."

He was wise enough not to mention the fact that the injured man was an escaped convict. It could do no particular good, and such disquieting news might arouse fresh fears in the heart of the fond mother.

Reassured by his words, for she knew Alec to be the essence of truthfulness, she soon got him in touch with the doctor, who was just then at a certain house. Upon hearing something of the facts over the wire he promised to return home immediately, and Alec said he would wait for him, so as to post him further ere he started for Harmony Lake among the hills.

Sure enough, before many minutes had elapsed, the new car of Dr. Codling came booming along the road in a cloud of dust. What little he had heard over the wire had certainly aroused the curiosity of the gentleman, and he was eager to obtain the full particulars.

Alec told his story as briefly as he could, for he knew that the quicker the physician got started, the sooner would the intense suffering of poor Hans be relieved. Besides, in good time no doubt Dr. Codling would hear everything connected with the affair from the boys in camp.

He hurriedly went into the house, to come out again with a number of things he thought would be needed under the circumstances. Alec stayed only long enough to see him start off.

"I'm glad I told him about that blooming old tiger, and he's got a gun aboard in case he's held up," he said to himself as he once more took to his motorcycle to start on his round of visits. "But the chances are, the beast will be so disgusted by now with his many mistakes, that he won't have the heart to try again. Those circus men ought to have an easy time getting him back in his cage; because he'll remember that he always had plenty to eat when in that thing."

So for an hour or so Alec had his hands full; but accomplishing all his errands he finally started back to camp shortly after one o'clock; with several mysterious bundles fastened to the sides of the reliable Comet.

CHAPTER XXII**WHAT THE CREVICE HELD**

"Hello! Freckles, how's everything?"

This was Alec's salutation to one of his chums, as he dropped off his motorcycle close to the camp.

"Heard you honking, and came over to meet you, Alec," said the lengthy one, with a broad grin. "My father got here, and he's still working with Hans, getting him ready for the return trip to the pen. Jack is helping him, because he wants to hang around Hans as much as he can."

"But didn't I hear a dog give tongue when I came along?" remarked Alec.

"Sure you did. They're here, all right," said Freckles, nodding toward the camp.

"Oh! you mean the wardens?" observed Alec, with a shade of regret on his face. "Well, I don't suppose there was anything else for Hans, and so he'll have to go back to serve out his sentence."

"They told us something we didn't know before," Freckles declared.

"About Hans?" asked the newcomer, quickly.

"Sure," Freckles went on; "there's a reward offered by the governor to any one supplying information leading to the capture of either or both of the runaways."

"I don't like that," was Alec's immediate response, while the frown grew wider. "It's all very well taking the fifty they offered for the capture of the tiger, and I'm going to grab it to help Jack get his motorcycle; but blood money—well, none of us want to touch a cent of that! How much is it?"

"Five hundred for each," came Freckles' answer; "and the head warden says we're entitled to the whole shooting match, because only for us neither of the men would have been taken."

"They got the other fellow then?" demanded Alec.

"Oh! easy. The dogs followed his trail, cold as it was," the tall boy remarked, admiringly. "Pretty good hounds, I think, to do that. But about that reward, Alec?"

"Look here," said the other, sternly, "I don't imagine you're giving that even a thought, Freckles. It wouldn't be like a chum of mine to dream of taking money for handing a poor chap over to such a hard life. What's on your mind? Speak up now and tell me."

"Jack suggested it first; and both Budge and me we thought it was a mighty clever idea," Freckles started saying, a twinkle in his merry eye that told his chum there could be no wrong motive back of his words.

"Hurry up and tell me about this idea of Jack's. What does he propose doing? Something pretty decent I beg you, because Jack's the boy to have a head for such things. Come, spin the yarn, Freckles."

"We found out some things while you were away," began the other. "For one, that since Hans quit the service of Mr. Kinkaid he's married, and has a little baby girl. That's what's eating his heart out. It was to see them he made this break for liberty."

"Yes, that makes it all the harder to think of taking money offered for his being caught; but hurry up, can't you, Freckles? You're worse than that ice wagon, Budge, when you get to telling an exciting story."

"Listen, then," Freckles continued, impressively. "Jack said we ought to accept the full reward if it came our way; and then turn over every cent of it to that poor little wife and baby. It will help tide over till Hans gets loose again. And he said we ought to hunt them up too, and have our folks do something for 'em."

Alec whistled to express his astonishment.

"That's great stuff!" he exclaimed, with a sparkle in his eye; "and I'm proud of my chum who could think up such things. Say, did Hans hear it all?"

"He sure did, every word of it," replied the other.

"Did he say anything?" Alec went on.

"He tried to several times, but acted like he was too full for a single word. I sure saw tears rolling down the poor chap's cheeks. I guess he thinks Jack Kinkaid is the best fellow that ever came down the pike."

"Which nobody will deny," declared Alec, enthusiastically. "Jack ought to be a lawyer, for he knows just how to go about things in the most diplomatic way I ever heard of. And Freckles, believe me, Hans will pay him back before he goes away from here, or I miss my guess. Think of applying the reward money to helping the wife and baby of the escaped convict! It's the grandest idea going! Jack is sure to win out on that line!"

"Better come into camp, and have a bite, Alec," the other lad observed. "We kept things warm for you, expecting you'd be along any time. Glad to see you didn't forget the necessary grub we wanted so bad. This looks like a ham, all right."

"Which it is, and nothing else. Here, load

up with the stuff, while I glue the good old Comet to a tree again. I don't take chances any more, while the woods are filled with all sorts of queer runaways," said Alec.

"But what's all this my dad's been telling us about your meeting up again with Old Black and Yellow, and giving him the worst scare ever?" Freckles asked, as he stood there with his arms full of various packages.

"It's so, all right," laughed his chum. "Tell you all about it later, when we're sitting around the camp fire, jabbering. I met the circus people on the road, with a wagon cage, and set them on the track of Nero. They're likely to trap him soon; and I'm promised the fifty that's out for information looking to his being caged once more. When I mentioned scruples against taking blood money Nero wasn't included in the deal. And if I get it, Jack will be that much nearer his mount for that long trip down to North Carolina this fall."

Alec found the wardens waiting for the doctor to say they could place the injured man in his car, and take him to Staunton. They expected to have a couple of their number ride back with Hans, so as to keep constant watch over him; though assured that there was not the remotest chance of the poor fellow putting a foot on the ground short of a month.

The doctor seemed a bit loth to leave. Truth to tell, the busy man found himself coming insensibly under the charm of the outdoor life which he had not known for lo, these many years. But a sense of duty recalled him; patients would be disappointed if he remained away longer.

As for the wardens, they were taking things easy after their long hunt. Success made them satisfied to remain in the camp just so long as circumstances allowed. The boys had fed them and every man was of the opinion that the lengthy lad had a decided leaning toward being a firstclass cook. And the coffee Budge served would have been hard to equal.

Why, even the dogs had lain down, and were contented. They looked up when Alec came in, as though asking who he might be; but some instinct seemed to tell them that the grand hunt was at an end, and they were, as Freckles said, "not caring whether school kept or not."

Jack, Budge and the doctor were hovering near the spot where the wounded man lay. His broken leg had been nicely set, and the doctor promised to get it in a plaster cast as soon as they reached town. After that he could be removed to the penitentiary at the convenience of the officers.

It was almost time for the parties to separate.

The good doctor had pronounced his work completed, in so far as the preliminary part of it went. And Jack stood back as the wardens came to raise the wounded prisoner, so that he could be placed in the tonneau of the new car.

Presently all was ready. One of the guards sat alongside Hans to support him, if necessary, while the other had taken a seat with the doctor in front by the steering wheel.

“Wait!”

It was Hans himself who said this. His eyes were fastened on the anxious face of Jack Kinkaid; and there might be seen a trace of a smile around them.

Alec clutched the arm of Freckles.

“It’s coming!” he whispered; but none of the others noticed either act or words.

Hans beckoned to Jack to approach, and as the boy did so, with a face from which every atom of color had fled, the captured fugitive held out his right hand.

“If you don’t feel like taking the hand of a criminal, Jack, I won’t think it hard of you,” he said, brokenly; “but I want to thank you for saying what you did. If you can help my Tillie and the kid like you proposed I’ll never, never forget it, I give you my word. Tell the poor little girl that if I live to come out of this I’m sure going to be the kind of man she’ll be proud of.”

Jack seized his hand and squeezed it. He wanted to say something—to ask Hans that one question which meant so much to his father; but somehow it seemed as if his tongue were glued to the roof of his mouth, for all the sound he was capable of making.

But there was no absolute need. If necessary he could see Hans later, could even pay him a visit in the penitentiary, to bring him happy news concerning those who were dear to him; and at such a time surely the convict would not refuse his request.

The man looked into his face. There were tears in his eyes, all unused to showing signs of any such weakness.

Hans drew Jack close to him, and bending his head said in his ear:

“I know what’s in your heart, boy, and I’m going to do what little I can to make amends for the wreck my revengeful act caused in the family of the best friend I ever had among men. When I’m gone away from here, Jack, do you climb up to that ledge where I was hiding. It’s an old snugery of mine, and my cousin Gid knew about it. Look in the cleft there, Jack. Perhaps you’ll find something hidden in that crevice that will please you. Good-by! Give Tillie my love, and the message I sent. I mean it every word, boy, every word!”

Then the doctor opened up, and the car started off. It passed from their sight presently; but before this happened, in spite of the pain such action might cause him, the recaptured convict raised himself from his seat, twisted half way around, and waved a last good-by to the boys who, in one way, had been the direct cause of his being retaken.

Jack fairly flew over to the tree that had occupied so strange a place in many of the thrilling happenings of the last few days and nights.

Alec had not heard the words whispered in the ear of his chum; but he had a lively imagination, and could easily guess what their nature must be. So he immediately set out after Jack; and Freckles, not to be left in the lurch, proceeded to also climb the tree.

"Hey! what ails you, fellows?" bawled the wondering Budge. "Don't tell me that measly old tiger's come to town again, and the lot of you have took to the tall timber? Cracky! in that case I'd better be laying hold of the gun, and get ready to blow his blooming old tail off!"

Nobody paid any attention to what Budge was saying. He could never have accomplished that difficult climb anyway; for after passing the crotch where the ham had been tied, there was a long smooth place destitute of limbs, that

must prove an effectual bar to Budge's climbing aspirations.

But Alec had done it before, and was ready to duplicate his previous performance; while Jack, spurred on by the eager longing that possessed his hungry soul, seemed to count that obstacle as of no moment.

He went up like a monkey. Alec saw him drag himself over the edge of the ledge; and when a minute later he also managed to gain the shelf, it was to see Jack emerge from a crevice in the face of the solid rock at the back. He held something in his hand that looked like a packet of papers, and was nervously trying to examine the same.

Then the anxious Alec heard him give vent to a sigh that seemed to well up from his very heart.

"What luck, Jack?" he demanded.

"The very finest, Alec," came the joyous response.

"You've recovered the missing drawing design that was the keynote of your father's wonderful little invention, and which he could never think up again just right. Is that it, old chap?" asked the other, as Freckles arrived on the scene.

"Yes, I've got here in my hand the lost drawing that means life and health and fortune to my dearest dad. Oh! boys, I'm sure the happiest

fellow on the face of this earth today!" cried Jack.

The others laughed joyously.

"Well," said Alec, "you may think you are, Jack; but there's three chums of yours that believe they've got a right to feel the same way. It's bully all around!"

CHAPTER XXIII

GOOD NEWS

Of course Alec knew what must follow.

They could not hope to keep Jack Kinkaid in camp for the balance of the time they had figured on staying there at Harmony Lake.

"Take my machine, and run down home, Jack," said Alec. "The promise we made is all off now; and besides, this is a case of necessity equal to the errand that dragged me after Freckles' dad. Stay all night with your people; but if you can break away tomorrow, just understand that we'll be looking for you; and that things won't seem just all they should with the rest of the bunch, till you get back again."

Jack was smiling perpetually now. It seemed to him that the clouds had indeed rolled away, and the sun shone as never before. All Nature looked beautiful, in his happy eyes. Never before had the birds sung quite so joyously, or the foliage of the mountains seemed as beautiful. For his heart was filled with thanksgiving, because he knew that the cloud would surely

be lifted from the mind of the father whom he loved so devotedly.

He lost little time in getting away, and the others gave him a rousing send-off.

"Better not think of returning tonight, Jack," Alec had said at the last moment, "you'll find a thousand things to talk about at home. And altogether, fellows, it looks as though those three fine motorcycles might be in sight. Given another month or so, and I'll have to be ordering them."

"Yes," remarked Budge, "you're right, Alec. But there was a dark time, you know, when I began to fear that my chances weren't as good as they might be. But it proved that my long head didn't fail me, and that gas wasn't eating up my little roll of spuds as I thought."

Nobody made any remark, only Jack and Alec exchanged expressive glances, knowing as they did upon what unsafe grounds poor Budge was building his air castles.

"It'll be a shock to the poor chap," whispered Jack.

"Oh! he can stand it; and besides, we'll talk to his dad about it. You know Mr. Clifford is a jolly old gentleman; and when we tell him the fun we've had; and how Budge is improving so fast in learning to take care of himself, the chances are ten to one he'll never try to carry

out that threat. Budge has been punished quite enough. He's worried, and that's the worst way of paying up debts."

That night there were only three of the motorcycle chums in camp. But no longer did they have to worry over anything; for just before dark Alec heard the wireless calling; and having been instructed in a measure by Jack how to manipulate the business, and slowly read the letters that were sounded in those loud clicks, he presently came running down to camp with the latest news.

"Jack just called me up, fellows," he announced, proudly. "I managed to make out what he was sending, too, from over at Bud Perkaizer's house. They got him first clip; soon as he saw his old trainer the tiger walked up to him, and asked to be put back in his cage. Anyhow he's shut up tight again, and happy because he's had a good old square feed at last."

"Hurrah!" shouted Budge, throwing up his cap with enthusiasm. "So there goes the very last straw in our trouble jar. No longer will I have to sit up half the night keeping watch, while my poor sleepy chums snatch a few winks. But fellows, really and trully it's going to take me a long time to make up for what sleep I've lost since we started out on this little picnic!"

Freckles started to make some sort of sar-

castic remark; but apparently thinking better of it, only grinned, and shook his head, as though he believed that Budge must be getting hopeless.

Of course Jack came back on the morrow. He was looking so radiant that Alec declared there was no need of asking what the result of his trip had been.

"Father is like a new man already," Jack said; "as soon as he had that paper in his hand everything seemed to come back to him. I've no need of worrying about him. And that little Kinkaid engine will soon be astonishing the world of sport; because it's the greatest thing ever invented."

"What about Hans?" asked Alec.

"Father finished with him, and they took him back. I didn't see him again; but they told me he wasn't the same sour man as before. Hans is seeing a great light. And I sent a letter to his wife, telling her to come to Staunton; that friends wanted to assist her. Your father gave me twenty dollars to enclose, Freckles. He was touched by the story of Hans, and says he's going to do everything he can to get the governor, an old friend of his, to pardon the poor chap."

"That sounds like good news, Jack," declared Alec.

"And let me tell you, fellows," declared Freckles, positively; "that when my dad puts his mind to a thing, it's just got to move. Mark my word, Hans will be out of that place before snow flies again."

After that there was nothing to be done but enjoy each passing day, after the manner of happy lads in camp. They fished and swam to their hearts' content; and even Budge began to evince an interest in the art of cookery.

"I'm going to get our girl to show me how to do lots of things, boys," he surprised them by saying one day. "We've got a bang-up cook-book home too, and I'm going to study that up. First place, I think everybody ought to know how to cook a little. Might save their life some day, if they happened to get lost in the woods, you know. Then there's another thing I've got in mind, if I'm lucky enough to be along when you start for that trip to Dixie this fall."

"What's that about, Budge?" demanded Freckles, grinning.

"Why," the fat boy went on, "I've been reading so much about roast 'possum and sweet potatoes that I'm just hankering to try it. My mouth fairly waters for a taste of the prize Southern dish. And I want to know all about cooking the game, so if we happen to run across

a fat 'possum I might give you a treat you'd never forget."

"Hear! hear! Budge is waking up, fellows!" cried Freckles, elevating both hands to indicate intense interest in what concerned future meals.

And so they passed the time away, until finally the hour arrived when they had counted on breaking camp, to return once more to their several homes.

"I'm glad, and I'm sorry!" Jack declared as he helped pack the tent in the old "White Elephant," which he had repaired so thoroughly that it was hoped there might be no breakdown until the town was reached.

"Same here!" echoed Freckles. "I want to see my folks all right; but my heart's going to turn this way many times, as I picture the jolly old place, with all we had happen to us up here at Harmony."

Alec could hardly echo the thought that animated the others, for he was an orphan, with not a near relative in the world, that he knew of. Still, he thought a great deal of his guardian, Mr. Worthington, who was always kind and generous to him.

It was with shouts and laughter that they finally quitted the scene of their week's sport—Camp Surprise it would always be known in their minds; because, as Freckles declared, for the

first few days they had done little else than meet up with one astonisher after another.

But this outing was destined to be only a little foretaste to others which were in store for the motorcycle chums. In the near future they were planning a much more ambitious trip, particulars of which will be given in the succeeding volume of this series.

The wife of Hans, a pretty and sweet young woman, with a darling little baby, came to the home of Dr. Codling in response to that letter Jack sent. Friends soon made her fairly contented and happy. She found congenial employment in sewing, and was able to easily support herself.

Jack made a persistent effort, and through the influence of Dr. Codling the reward offered by the state for the recapture of the escaped convicts was paid over to the boys; and by them publicly transferred to the wife of Hans.

Whether Freckles' father would be successful in getting his friend the governor to pardon Hans in the fall, no one could say; but he made several visits to the capital; and on his return the last time smiled mysteriously when questioned; so the eager boys made up their minds things were working, and that Tillie's husband might soon be restored to his waiting family.

As for Gid Staples, none of them ever knew

just what he had meant to do when he came up to Harmony Lake. He returned to Staunton, but kept close lips, possibly for fear lest he get himself in trouble with the authorities, on the score of having tried to assist a runaway convict to avoid recapture.

In good time Budge learned about his error in connection with the burning of the three gas jets; but his father forgave him, and hence he did not grieve. But he never ceased to believe that Jack and Alec, perhaps Freckles also, knew the truth while still in camp.

Just one month later, before the opening of autumn, three magnificent motorcycles, the image of Alec's, arrived in Staunton; and three boys found it difficult to get their usual amount of sleep that night, for thinking of the great times they expected to have when they had fully mastered the various devices connected with such up-to-date machines calculated to go a mile a minute under favorable conditions.

Just what an important part these same motorcycles were destined to play in the near future of these four comrades, will have to be left to the next story of this series, now published, and entitled: "The Motorcycle Chums in the Land of the Sky; or, the Young Moonshiner's Secret."

THE END.

THE BENNINGTON CASE.

THERE was little that Inspector Bassett did not know about the methods of conducting a post-office. In the matter of accounts he was excelled by none and equalled by few. I used to think he was so expert that he could tell by looking at a postmaster whether or not the accounts of his office would balance. Bassett was active both in mind and body, and there was seldom a false motion or figure he would not catch instantly; and so good was his record at the Department in this respect, and in all others, that it was often remarked that nothing could escape him. The reputation had been earned, and, as I have said, it was most admirably sustained.

In his customary business style he stepped into the post-office at Bennington, Vermont, one day about noon, for the purpose of checking up the accounts of the postmaster. The postmaster's name at that particular moment was Thomas J. Bronson, to whom the Inspector introduced himself in the usual manner, and added that he had called to look over his books, inventory the stock on hand and make him a pleasant visit. Bronson, after telling Bassett that he was very glad indeed to meet him, and delighted to think he had called to look him over, suggested that, as it was so

near the dinner hour, perhaps they had better go and serve the inner man before they attempted to work the mental man ; adding, that had he known he was coming he would have told Mrs. Bronson, so that her table would have been prepared for one more than usual. The arrangement was satisfactory, and Bassett went to the hotel and Bronson to his home.

It was not long, however, before the Inspector had returned to the office, where he was chatting with the clerks, momentarily expecting Bronson. At length an hour had passed since his return, and still no sign of Bronson. Could he be sick? One of the clerks went to his residence to ascertain, and soon returned with the information that Mrs. Bronson had informed him that the postmaster ate lightly and returned to the office much quicker than usual. Where could he be?

Inquiry was made at the hotels, stores and shops, and no one had seen him. The news of his remarkable disappearance spread to every corner of the town, and every idle person joined in the search. Finally, a farmer drove in on the road leading from the south and observing the unusual activity on the streets, asked what was up, and when he was informed that Bronson could not be found, he imparted the thrilling intelligence that, at a point about two miles from Bennington, he "met two men in a carriage, behind two horses, driving like the deuce, and unless he was all-firedly mistaken one of the fellows was Tom Bronson."

This so electrified the people of Bennington that

they scarcely knew what to do or, which way to turn; and one of them told me afterward, when describing the scene, that while Bassett was quizzing the farmer in front of the hotel, he appeared dazed at what had occurred, while everybody was crowding closer to catch the conversation. There had been no such excitement in Bennington since the fall of Sumter.

Recovering slightly from his unconsciousness, the Inspector ordered the fleetest steed in town, and was soon pursuing the fleeing postmaster in hot haste. Arriving at Hoosick Junction, the nearest railroad station in that direction, Bassett learned positively that Bronson had left on a train bound eastward, which passed about half an hour or so before. Time was precious. He could be intercepted at North Adams. Bassett was at home working the telegraph, and when the operator at North Adams settled down to take the message that Bassett was furiously firing at him, he thought that old Ben Franklin himself was at the Hoosick Junction end. The train came too soon for the excited operator, and, before he could execute the command, it had gone, and with it Bronson. When the cheerless intelligence was wired back to Mr. Franklin at Hoosick Junction that the man described was not on the train, Bassett closed the key with a bang and turned towards Bennington with a heavy heart. This was his first disappointment, and, although it had occurred through no fault of his, he would rather have lost anything, everything, than Bronson.

Bronson had lived in Bennington all his life, and was now probably forty-five. He was a friend to every body and everybody was a friend to him. No stronger illustration of this condition was ever known. His friends were everywhere, and, had he told them he was in trouble, his wants would have been quickly supplied. But he did not, neither does any one know to this day the real cause of his misfortunes.

The finances of the post-office were found to be decidedly out of tune, and when Bassett was through he could see quite plainly why Bronson had suggested dinner before business. It was also discovered by the school trustees, to whose board Bronson belonged, and for whom he had acted in the capacity of treasurer, that there was also a discrepancy in the school fund of a few thousand. When these facts became known, every man in Bennington wore the aspect of a mourner. Surprise and pity walked hand in hand.

Bassett worked assiduously and faithfully for months searching for Bronson. Both in and out of Bennington—everywhere was he hunting for clues. Frequently he thought he could place him, only to find nothing when the theory was exhausted. Yet with all his efforts and disappointments he never wearied. At length it occurred to him that if another person could be detailed to aid him—some one who was an entire stranger in Bennington and vicinity—good results might follow. I was the one selected, and, after having been told by Bassett all he knew about the case, I quietly turned up in Bennington.

Of course I could not tell you, in a short story like this, the many and interesting details of my work in Vermont. My object was to find somebody, some friend of Bronson's, who, in an unguarded moment, might drop some little word that would possibly reveal the secret of Bronson's whereabouts. It was not the work of a day or a week, but of months. No one knew my right name, and no one knew my real business. I never talked of Bronson, but I listened intently whenever his name was mentioned, and also tried to be on familiar terms with those who liked to talk about him to their associates and townspeople.

I learned quickly that only a few, if any, of his old companions actually knew where he was. His wife and child might know, though there was not the slightest evidence that they did. The mysterious hiding-place was, I sometimes feared, beyond the grave. In my intercourse with the people, however, I had settled one fact conclusively, and that was that Bronson had for years expressed a desire to live in the far west, and he had told several persons that when he did decide to leave Bennington he should settle on a ranch somewhere. Could he have followed his inclinations, and was he not now realizing the anticipations of his better days?

One beautiful evening in the early autumn the first ray of success dawned upon a long and patient waiting. I had been told by one who knew that Bronson was alive. Who it was that told me, or how the secret came to be told, no one save Bassett and myself knows. The person who imparted the

information is to this day unconscious of it, and should he read these lines he would be unable to recall any instance or circumstance that would serve to brighten his recollection. I also learned a little more than that Bronson was alive. I ascertained beyond a question that he was actually on a sheep ranch in Colorado. I did not think it possible for me to obtain anything more specific, and, having faith that this would answer, I hastily sought an interview with Bassett, promised to meet him ten days hence in Denver, and, turning my face toward the setting sun, followed the course of the Star of the Empire.

Entering Colorado from the south-east, clad in a festive suit of corduroy, with a sombrero and Smith and Wesson attachment, I set forth among the ranches and ranchers, wool buyers and commission men, with a good photograph of Tom Bronson. Some of the journeys were long and tedious, yet, sustained by faith, which some days was a trifle faltering, I pressed on for seven days without meeting a man, woman or child who had ever seen a person that looked like Bronson, or who had ever heard of him. Partly for the purpose of rest, but chiefly for the purpose of meeting Bassett, I went to Denver, where I arrived with no information of importance to impart, except such as pertained to ranches and the sheep industry generally.

During the day in Denver we learned from an extensive wool buyer that many people from Vermont are engaged in raising sheep and wool in the vicinity

of Fort Collins and Greeley. We were also informed that it would be a very easy task to ascertain whether or not our man was in the Greeley region, as the sheriff at Greeley was an old ranchman as well as a buyer, and his business now was such that it enabled him to continue well posted on the important question of ranches, ranchmen and herders. We immediately proceeded to Greeley, and I will relate what occurred after we arrived.

In our room at the hotel we met the sheriff and the postmaster for consultation. The postmaster was confident he had seen a face that resembled Bronson's. The sheriff was equally confident that he had not, but he knew of a man, who owned a ranch, and who lived about fifteen miles to the eastward, who formerly resided somewhere in Vermont, that would know Bronson if there was such a man in this section of the State. He said if the case was his he should go straightway to this man, and, if he did not know him, he did not think it would be much use to spend more time around Greeley. We accepted the sheriff's kind advice.

Arriving at the ranch, where dwelt the man who was supposed to know it all, we obtained very little satisfaction indeed. It was the oft-repeated tale I had heard a hundred times or more. He didn't know, but he thought somebody else who lived about twenty miles north could put his finger on the very man, and, of course, we drove twenty miles farther to be informed that he never saw, heard or dreamed of such a person. He suggested that we call on a

certain physician in Greeley, who could give us "straight tips" on Vermont people in Northern Colorado. "The doctor," he said, "once resided in Vermont, where he was a very prominent man. Recently he engineered a New England dinner given in Greeley, at which there were more than two hundred guests, who at one time or another had lived somewhere in the Eastern States." "If I was looking for anybody from Vermont in this part of the country," he observed, "I should call on the doctor, for he knows where they all are." We returned to Greeley late that night and decided to see the doctor on the following morning.

The doctor informed us that while he was living in Castleton he knew Bronson well. Had not seen him in ten or twelve years, that he knew of. Had read in the papers about the trouble at Bennington, but had never seen anybody before who thought Bronson was in Colorado, much less in this section. Was very positive he was not at the New England dinner. Upon reflection he said it did occur to him that there was a stranger there who came with some one from Fort Collins, but his name was not Bronson, though possibly it may have been Bronson under another name. If it was his case he should go over to Fort Collins and hunt for the stranger who was at the dinner. We decided not to hunt for the stranger till we had first talked with every person in Greeley who had formerly resided in Vermont. We procured a list of these people from the doctor, a part of which Bassett took, and the other portion fell to me. We

were to see and talk with every one of the people named.

The first name on my list was that of a Mr. Child. He owned a comfortable little home in town and a farm just outside. I went to his house, where I met Mrs. Child and her daughter; the husband being absent, but expected back soon. Much to my surprise she told me that she used to live in Bennington; that she and her husband and their little son, who was now the village telegraph operator, moved from Bennington about fifteen years before; that they came to Greeley because in every deed given for property here there is a clause which binds and prevents the purchaser, his heirs or assigns from ever allowing a drop of liquor to be sold on the premises for any purpose. She told me she knew Mr. Bronson quite well in Bennington, and that her husband had been on intimate terms with him.

Presently Mr. Child came. He was exceedingly courteous, and every inch a gentleman, well informed.

He remembered Bronson distinctly. Saw him every day for years and sat with him in the same lodge in Bennington long, long ago. The picture did not look as Tom used to. Time had left a few wrinkles here and there; the face was, perhaps, a little fuller and the silver hairs that could be seen were not there then, yet he thought he would recognize it as Tom Bronson. He had taken the Bennington paper ever since he came west and was very familiar with all that had happened in Bennington, especially all that had ever been mentioned in print.

He did not think it could be possible that Bronson was in the vicinity of Greeley, yet, like the postmaster, the more he reflected the more and more he believed he had seen that face somewhere within a short time. Besides being very entertaining, the Child family was giving me more information than any people I had met, and, feeling that I should not hurry away, at least for manners' sake, I remained to dinner. The family and myself were enjoying a social visit, as well as a feast of good things prepared by Mrs. Child, when suddenly the lady, looking across the table at her husband, said: "Father, do you remember that at the time Mr. Carter called and spent the evening here, about six weeks ago, he related the story about a man coming to one of the ranches, owned by Currier, in which Mr. Carter has an interest, who wanted to hire out to herd sheep?"

Mr. Child did remember that Mr. Carter told a story about such a man, but his recollection as to what he said was very indistinct indeed.

"I remember," continued Mrs. Child, "that he said the man said he was from New England, and that he had come west to learn all the details about the sheep and ranch business, so that in a year or so he would be prepared to buy a ranch and follow the business on his own account. I remember also that Mr. Carter said they thought he had seen better days, and that, partially through pity, they employed him; he proved to be a valuable herder, and, at the time Mr. Carter was here, the man was still on the ranch."

I had become deeply impressed with the story of the strange man, and instantly asked where the

ranch was located, and where Mr. Carter could be seen.

"The ranch," said Mr. Child, "is about twenty seven miles from Greeley, but I think Mr. Carter can be seen at his store, which is about three blocks distant from where we are now sitting."

I could scarcely wait for dinner to be over before I asked Mr. Child if he would not be kind enough to take Bronson's picture around to the store and quietly ask Mr. Carter if he ever saw the man the picture represented. "If he answers in the affirmative," I said, "simply ask him what his name is and where he may be found. Do not tell him why you ask."

The family, as well as myself, awaited with great anxiety Mr. Carter's reply. But the suspense was brief, for, we had scarcely withdrawn from the table before Mr. Child returned in great haste, and with barely breath sufficient to say: "That's your man. His name is George Hastings, and he is now at Currier's upper ranch."

Where was Bassett? I must find him without delay and tell him the good news. Glancing up the street I saw him coming, and as he approached he asked in a happy manner if I intended to spend all of the remaining autumn and winter months with the Child family. I answered that if the length of my stay was measured by the information I had gathered here, in comparison with my success at other places, I would remain with the Child family till spring, at least.

I then proceeded to break the news to him gently. Although he had known me a long time, and had never

known me to deceive or tell a lie, it was necessary on this occasion for me to have my statements verified by every member of the Child family and some of their neighbors before he would accept them. He had been around all the forenoon with a lot of Vermonters who had never heard of Bronson, and the result was that he had become decidedly skeptical. He soon recovered, however, and we set about preparing for the trip to Currier's upper ranch.

It was about three o'clock when we got away. A pair of small horses, a two-seated light wagon, and a cheerful driver accompanied us. We expected to make the distance in about three hours when we started, but by the time we had made the first four miles it was very apparent to the anxious passengers that it would require about three days with fair winds. The horses were too small, too weak, too slow, and just a little too lazy to win golden opinions from strangers; but it should be said to their credit that the roads were sandy. The driver was the best informed man—excepting Mr. Child—that I had drawn into conversation in Colorado. Only for his ceaseless flow of wisdom, and Bassett's sweet melodies, I would have given up in despair and thrown myself overboard.

At half-past seven, the man on the forecastle announced a light ahead, and, when he informed us it was at Currier's, there was great rejoicing. You, who know how deceiving distances are in that country, will not be surprised when I tell you that we did not reach the light till nine o'clock. It shone from a small window in the only house for many miles around. It was the only beacon by which mariners

on the boundless prairie guided their frail craft at night, and, as before stated, it was Currier's. The little rude domicile was the home of the superintendent of the ranch, and it was here that the herders partook of their morning and evening meals, while their flocks were secured in the corrals near by. We drove as closely to the house as possible, without attracting attention, while Bassett stole up softly through the darkness, to get a look through the window. He returned hastily and announced: "He is there, leaning back in his chair, against the wall on the opposite side of the room, peacefully smoking."

Could it be possible that the object of our search was now within our reach? It seemed as if there must be some mistake as there had been so many times before. But no! Bassett says he is there and that he's wearing the same happy expression that he wore away with him, the first and only time he ever met him. "Come, we must go in and apprise him that the time has come for him to leave the ranch." A moment later we had entered without knocking and Bassett was standing face to face with Bronson, who appeared almost speechless with surprise.

"Bronson," said Bassett as he was reaching for a pair of handcuffs, "don't you know me, and don't you think it is about time you returned from dinner?"

"Yes," said Bronson, "I recognize you. You are the last person I could forget," and, as he raised his hands to receive the iron wristlets, he added, "and you have not looked for me with more anxiety than I have for you. I'm glad you've come, and I'll go cheerfully."

Besides those I have mentioned there were present the superintendent and his wife and two young men, who with George Hastings, as Bronson was known, were the herders. Great was their surprise at the strange proceedings, and it required no little argument to convince them that George Hastings was not Bronson's name, and that we could not be mistaken. When Bronson had assured everybody present that he was the man, and that he was willing to go, the assemblage become more cheerful, and we were invited to partake of the best the house afforded. A very hospitable supper was prepared, and highly enjoyed, while the horses were being nourished and Bronson was packing up. It was a lively night at the upper ranch, and, at about midnight, when we were ready to bid farewell to the scene forever, sympathy and tears were bestowed upon poor George Hastings as they had never been before. As was Tom Bronson a favorite in Bennington, so was George Hastings on the ranch.

The trip back to Greeley was a weary one, though more enjoyed than was the one going out. Bronson told his sad experiences since he left home, and I assure you, they were listened to with much interest. Some of them had been painful, and were further illustrations that the way of the transgressor is hard. Of late he had written to his wife once each month. He sent the letters to a friend in Denver, who forwarded them to a cousin of Bronson's residing in Madrid, N. Y., who in time would forward them to another relative in Burlington, Vermont, and this

person would send them to Mrs. Bronson, who was then in Rutland, by messenger.

His life on the ranche had been so unpleasant and distasteful that he courted relief in any form. His duties were to go out at break of day with a flock of sixteen hundred sheep, remain with them all the live-long day alone, exposed to the rays of a bright sun, unable to read or find a cooling drink or a comfortable shade. At nightfall his flocks were driven back to the corral, and, after a scanty meal, the shepherd turned in to rest on the soft side of a bench in a straw covered coop adjoining the sheep pens. And all this for something like \$25 per month. Is it any wonder that more sheep-herders commit suicide than any other class of people, and is it any wonder that Tom Bronson was glad to leave?

The morning was well advanced when we had returned to Greeley. Our arrival, as well as our mission, was soon known by all the villagers, and by train time many had gathered at the station to see us off, among whom were Mr. and Mrs. Child, the doctor, the postmaster, the sheriff and the landlord. Bronson renewed the acquaintance of those who knew him in Vermont, and was introduced to many others he had never seen before. After assuring the doctor that he was not present at the New England dinner, Bronson bade them all good-bye, and soon we were steaming rapidly toward Denver.

Our journey back to Vermont was uneventful. When we arrived, the United States Court was in session in Rutland, and, without delay, at his request, Bronson was arraigned, plead guilty, and was sen-

tenced to pay a fine of \$5,000 and be imprisoned for five years. When he entered the prison he told the warden that that was the first real happy moment he had seen since he left Bennington.

Having no sheep to look after in the prison, the warden made Bronson chief bookkeeper, and in that capacity he is still serving. He sent word to Bassett not long ago that his books were often inspected, and that they always balanced to a farthing.

JOHN STRINGHAM'S VISITORS.

JERSEY CITY is a queer old town, famous for its poor streets and high taxes, yet it contains many good people, and among the best and bravest is John Stringham. John was a soldier bold in times of war, and, besides carrying upon his person the scars of many a hard-fought battle, he is the proud possessor of as honorable a record as any veteran in Hudson County. There may be more learned men than Stringham, but none who have served their country more faithfully and received less for it. Time has not dimmed his eyesight nor daunted his courage, but his wounds have slightly affected his nerves, so that no longer is his hand and aim as steady as in boyhood, when he was known as the William Tell of Jersey.

As a reward for his patriotic services to his country, at the earnest solicitation of every patriot in town, Stringham was appointed to the honorable position of night watchman in the post-office. The great building which he was to watch and protect was once the home of a wealthy gentleman, who, when he became tired of it, sold it to Uncle Sam; and inasmuch as it was erected for private and not public purposes, it contained more cellars and sub-cellars, chambers and

ante-chambers, dark hallways, huge airshafts, and mysterious recesses than are required in a well regulated post-office, and more than any one ordinary watchman, or even a Stringham, could faithfully watch, especially in the dark hours of night, and, of course, in—Jersey City.

The life of a night watchman in such a place, as the reader can fancy, is not a pleasant one, and had not Stringham's qualifications for such an important trust been so marked, he might possibly have been made postmaster instead. Thus was merit rewarded. But Stringham, renowned as he was, with an exalted estimation of his fearlessness and faithfulness, did not feel competent to watch the post-office at night alone. He felt that it was more than any able-bodied man could do, and do well, to perambulate through the dark and dismal passages, the ornamental caverns, the wine cellars and stables looking for tramps, robbers and irregularities—to say nothing about keeping up the fires. So it was that the veteran, as a matter of sheer necessity rather than a motive of safety, kept constantly with him, besides his six shooter (also a time-tried veteran), his faithful watch-dog Major.

The last night in January 1887 found the affairs of the office working satisfactorily, and when Stringham came at eight o'clock to assume his duties for the night, the remaining clerks were tying out packages of letters and singing love songs. The whole atmosphere of the place was laden with peace and contentment. Stringham usually found the affairs of the office quiet and peaceful, but on this occasion they were so hopeful and serene that when he sat

down to light his pipe and converse with Major the picture was one of happiness unalloyed. But it was the dead calm before the storm—the gentle zephyr before the cyclone.

One by one the clerks had completed their tasks and departed, while Major, who was an acknowledged enemy of idle triflers and evil doers, had been allowed to roam about in the highly enclosed yard in the rear. The last employé left at eleven o'clock, and, as was his custom, Stringham accompanied him to the door, bolted the same, turned down the lights and proceeded to the rear door to call his faithful companion. Major came quickly, and as he passed into the long hallway he crouched almost to the floor and growled as his master had never heard him before. Soothing words affectionately applied only added fury to the language and actions of the animal.

Thinking perhaps that only the bad boys had been worrying the dog through the fence, Stringham returned to the mailing room in his customary cheerfulness, humming his favorite Dixie, while Major was snarling at his feet. He had been absent from the room possibly a minute, but during that brief period unexpected visitors had noiselessly entered from some mysterious rendezvous, and when the warrior watchman proudly returned he beheld, to his horror and astonishment, five masked burglars drawn up in battle array around a mailing case.

Quick as a flash the old soldier grabbed his weapon and opened fire. Being somewhat stunned by the suddenness with which the scene had been shifted, and aided only by a dim light, the brave defender of the

government could scarcely recognize a burglar from a mail pouch, but for all that he emptied every chamber, and without hitting a burglar, so far as I could ever learn. He said afterward that he did not care particularly about killing anybody, for he had done enough of that in his time, but that he simply wanted to let them know that John Stringham was there.

They evidently quickly discovered that he was there, for scarcely before the last shot was fired, and some minutes before the smoke had cleared away, John Stringham and the dog had been bound, gagged and muzzled.

Having thus won the day and captured the enemy, a detachment of the visiting burglars was sent on a reconnoitering expedition through the building, while two slim gentlemen and two slim revolvers acted as a body guard for Stringham. On the top floor of the mansion dwelt janitor Nixon, Mrs. Nixon and a little daughter. They had retired early and were sleeping soundly when the burglars softly entered their bed chamber, quietly awoke them and directed them in whispers to get up and be tied. They reluctantly assented, and soon after, aided by the rays from a dark lantern, were securely pinioned. The once proud, but now dejected Stringham and the dog were then escorted to Nixon's room, where in the darkness they were left in charge of a clerical looking burglar, whose long gray beard was visible below his mask. He admonished his prisoners in gentle language that the penalty for a loud word or a suspicious move would be instant death.

The bold buglars, save the one on guard over the

prisoners, proceeded now to ransack the office and open the vault which contained the stamps and money. It was past midnight, and the occupants of the little chamber heard no noise, save what seemed to be the pounding on the vault below. Occasionally the venerable burglar would quietly move about the room just to let the helpless sufferers know that he was watching them.

At about two o'clock a loud report was heard and the building shook as from an earthquake. Stringham and company felt relieved, for they thought an entrance to the vault had been gained and the robbers would soon be off with their booty. Such was not the case, for it was not long before they heard the old man pacing around to see if all was well with them. Then came another long silence which was followed by another loud report. This time the prisoners thought the robbers had surely accomplished their purpose, and soon would be heard a signal for the gentlemanly guard to come down and be off. But the signal never came.

For an hour or more silence reigned supreme. Finally passing wagons were heard, and from Stringham's position he could see the gray dawn of morning breaking. He therefore concluded the trouble was over, and after no little effort he removed the gag from his mouth and ventured to ask: "Nixon, are you there?" Nixon answered as best he could. Being satisfied that they were alone, and that the coast was clear, the two men lost no time in untying themselves, when they proceeded below to view the ruins and give the alarm.

The spectacle that greeted them can better be imagined than described. The office had been sadly demolished. The walls had been battered, the floors were covered with debris, while the vaults and inside safes were completely wrecked, though their contents, aside from being badly scorched, were unharmed. Stringham says the ruins reminded him of a battle-field, after the enemy had been vanquished, except that the dead and dying were not there, though in this case the dead had likely been carried away before he arrived.

The police were promptly notified, and by eight o'clock thousands of curious people had been around to pay their respects to Stringham, who, by noon, had repeated the story so many times that he scarcely had sufficient strength to tell it always alike.

It would appear that the burglars had a more difficult task than they anticipated, or else they were frightened away, which probably was the case, for they left behind a few valuable tools. Upon leaving the office they proceeded to the ferry leading to Courtland Street, New York, and as they were waiting for a boat they were seen by Mr. Altemus, a reporter, who was on his way home. He watched them with a suspicious eye. By his aid three of the burglars were identified and sent to prison, one of whom was the old man with the gray beard, who had spent most of his life where he is now sojourning. On the trial Stringham again related the story of the robbery, to which the judge and jury listened with wrapped attention.

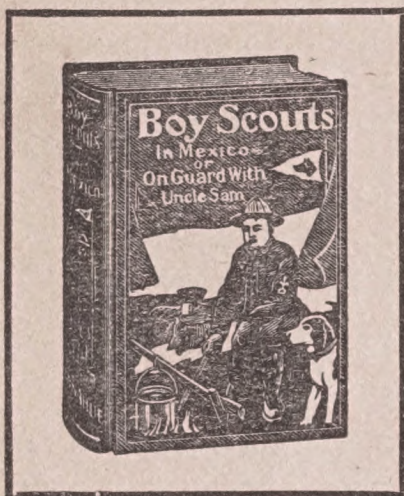
It is needless to add that he is still night watchman

at the post-office. May his hard-earned glory and fame never wane, and when the last bugle-call is sounded may all the good and true realize, as did the unwelcome visitors, that John Stringham is there.

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